THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.

MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY 50c PDC

APRIL DANCER
MARK SLATE
ALEXANDER WAVERLY
NAPOLEON SOLO
ILLYA KURYAKIN

The Master Manhunters of
United Network Command for Law and Enforcement
once again match their wits
against mighty THRUSH in

THE VELVET VOICE AFFAIR

The voice was velvet. But there was cobra-deadly peril in its timber. Only one person stood between it and this new, lethal danger to the world —The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.

A NEW Complete Novel by
ROBERT HART DAVIS

The Velvet Voice Affair

Number II of *The Girl From UNCLE*

Robert Hart Davis

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THE VELVET VOICE AFFAIR

By Robert Hart Davis

Captured by THRUSH, Mark Slate waits for horrible, certain death, as April Dancer fights through ring of foes to take a last gamble which can save him–or destroy them both…

ONE

MAN IN THE SHADOWS

It was noon of a Friday in New York City. The sidewalks of the street in the shadow of the United Nations Building were crowded with office workers hurrying to lunch. Expertly weaving in and out among them was a slim, exceedingly attractive girl in her early twenties with a delicately featured, mobile face framed by dark hair falling to her shoulders.

Although her dress was chic and stylish, it was no more than the majority of the secretaries and stenographers hurrying by. Nevertheless she somehow managed to stand out among them, for passing males, who for the most part were paying no attention to the hordes of other women available to look at, invariably glanced at her as she went by.

It couldn't have been just her beauty which attracted this male attention, because while she possessed considerable physical charm, there were other women on the street equally attractive. What made men notice her instantly was a mixture of vital aliveness and complete femininity.

The girl turned into a modest shop whose window sign identified it as *Del Floria's Tailor Shop*. Near the rear of the shop a pleasant looking woman seated before a pressing machine glanced up and smiled.

The girl smiled back, entered a dressing cubicle at the very rear of the room and pulled the door closed behind her.

She waited, facing the rear wall of the cubicle. In the outer room the pleasant looking woman pushed a hidden button on, her pressing machine. A panel slid aside and the waiting girl stepped through it. The panel closed automatically behind her.

In the spacious lobby behind the secret panel a clerk was on duty behind a counter. Giving her a smile of greeting, he said, "Welcome back, Miss Dancer," and handed her a small triangular badge.

"Thank you," the girl said in a soft voice. "Mr. Waverly in?"

"Yes. He's expecting you."

The girl pinned the small badge to her bosom. It resembled a piece of white cardboard or plastic, but it was coated with a radio-active substance which prevented strategically placed photo-electric cells from activating secret switches when the girl's passage momentarily broke their circuits. Without it she could have gone no farther in the building, because she would have set off dozens of alarms.

She went down a hallway to Alexander Waverly's office.

The director of the New York office of the *United Network Command of Law Enforcement*–more familiarly known as U.N.C.L.E. sat behind a huge, oval desk containing a panel of buttons, a microphone and speaker and several telephones. By pressing the proper button on the panel he could instantly communicate with any room in the building, with any other U.N.C.L.E. headquarters around the globe, or with any U.N.C.L.E. agent anywhere who possessed a portable communicator. By means of a special viewing screen on one wall, he could even see many far-away places–sometimes even the interior of rooms thousands of miles away–wherever one of U.N.C.L.E.'s agents had planted a transistorized visual bug.

Alexander Waverly was a tweedy, soft-spoken man past middle age with a schoolmaster manner which didn't quite hide the steel behind his apparent gentleness.

Two other people were in the office with him.

One was a handsome, dark-haired, muscular man with the suave appearance of a Madison Avenue junior executive. The other was a tall, coltish teen-ager.

The boy spoke first. "Gee, it's good to have you back, Miss Dancer," he said.

"Hi, Randy," she said: "It's good to be back."

Randy Kovac, still in high school, was U.N.C.L.E.'s first and only on-the-job trainee. He was supposed to work only in the Communications Section and only on Thursday and Friday afternoons between four and six, but U.N.C.L.E. headquarters so fascinated him that he was underfoot in all six sections nearly every minute he could spare from school or study.

The suave, handsome man said, "I'm glad to see you too, April, but for a less romantic reason."

Mr. Waverly said, "Your fortunate return ahead of schedule saves Mr. Solo a trip to Lombodia, Miss Dancer. I was planning to dispatch him there to assist Mr. Slate. Now, of course, you will go in his place, since you are more used to working with Mr. Slate."

April glanced at Napoleon Solo with a bare suggestion of a pout. "So you get the vacation I was expecting?"

"Hardly," Solo said with a wry grin. "Mr. Waverly merely has another assignment for me. I'll just be flying to Nigeria to join Illya instead of to Lombodia to join Mark."

He referred to Illya Kuryakin, the partner with whom he customarily worked on cases requiring more than one agent. The pair was generally regarded as U.N.C.L.E.'s crack team.

"*C'est Ie guerre*," April said with a shrug. "If we'd wanted vacations, I suppose we should have tried some other line of work."

“How were things in Geneva?” Solo asked.

“A little grim at first, but they got better.”

“You did an excellent job in foiling the attempt to assassinate the director of the International Red Cross, Miss Dancer,” Alexander Waverly said. “But your complete report can wait until I have briefed you on this next assignment. I want you to catch a six o’clock plane.”

April looked slightly startled.

After a glance at the wall clock she said ruefully. “Yes, sir.”

“Do you know anything about Lombodia?”

“Only that it’s in Central America and isn’t very big.”

“Less than one hundred thousand population,” Waverly said. “With half the population concentrated in the capital city of Vina Rosa. The balance is spread among numerous small villages surrounded by jungle. The economy is based entirely on the production of bananas and rubber.”

April Dancer nodded.

“I will furnish you a tourist guide containing more detailed information which you may read on the plane,” Waverly said. “Meantime, here is the problem. Lombodia’s production of rubber and bananas has unaccountably dropped nearly twenty-five percent in the past two months. Yet there has been no blight, drought or natural disaster to affect the crop, and the labor force has remained stable.”

“What has caused the drop then?” April inquired.

“That is the puzzle. I dispatched Mr. Slate there two weeks ago. His first reports suggested he had noted a strange apathy among the natives. Nothing drug induced, he was quite sure. He reported that everyone he talked to–when he could get anyone to talk to him–seemed in full possession of his mental faculties. Yet the natives all seemed preoccupied with inner thoughts. Never before having been in Lombodia, he was unable to judge if general lethargy is a national characteristic or merely a recent phenomenon.”

“What do you mean, when he could get anyone to talk to him?” April asked. “Mark never had that kind of trouble.”

“Oh, he reported receiving a friendly enough reception. It seems to be a matter of having difficulty getting people’s attention. As I said before, everyone seems so preoccupied by inner thoughts, he sometimes has to shake them by the shoulder to get a response. Yet, oddly, he reports that once he commands people’s attention, they speak entirely rationally and seem to have nothing whatever worrying them. It is as though he momentarily awakens them from some dark spell when he demands attention; then they lapse back into it again as soon as he walks away.”

“He has no idea of the cause?” April asked.

"Not at last report, which has been nearly a week ago now. Since then we have initiated all contact with him. And every time we contact him over his communicator, he has absolutely nothing to report."

"Maybe this strange lethargy has gotten to him," April suggested.

Alexander Waverly shook his head. "No. He is always quite lucid, and nothing at all in his tone suggests he isn't fully alert mentally."

Randy Kovac said, "Maybe because your calling him commands his attention, sir. How do you know the buzzing of his communicator hasn't been jolting him out of a spell, and he relapses back into it as soon as you cut the connection?"

All three of the others looked at the teen-age on-the-job trainee, Napoleon Solo and April with surprised respect, Alexander Waverly merely thoughtfully.

"That is a possibility which hadn't occurred to me," Waverly admitted. "On rare occasions it seems worthwhile to have you underfoot, Mr. Kovac. Incidentally, isn't your school lunch hour about over?"

Allowing himself a modest smile at the mild compliment, Randy glanced at the wall clock. "I still have twenty minutes. I grabbed a hot dog on the way over here. I can make it back in ten."

Mr. Waverly made a shooing gesture. "Go, go. I will not have the school authorities phoning me anymore, Mr. Kovac."

"Yes, sir," Randy said reluctantly. He went out the door.

"Hurrumph," Mr. Waverly said.

"In view of Mr. Kovac's suggestion, I think I will change your instructions slightly, Miss Dancer. You are still to assist Mr. Slate in his investigation if he seems normal when you arrive. However, if he seems to be suffering from the same peculiar mental preoccupation as the natives, I want both of you out of Lombodia before whatever causes the condition has a chance to affect you also. Get Mr. Slate on a plane and bring him back here immediately. We will place him under psychiatric examination and attempt to solve the riddle by long-distance. "

"Yes, sir," April said. "Where am I supposed to meet him?"

"He is staying at San Cecilia, a small village in the heart of the banana country. He has a room at a place called *Casa del Lupe*, which I understand is the village's sole inn. I will contact him over his communicator and tell him to expect you sometime tomorrow."

"Yes, sir," April said. "Will you ask him to arrange me a room at the inn too?"

Waverly nodded. "Now you had better run home and do what unpacking and repacking you have to. You have only about five and a half hours until plane time. Your ticket will be at the reservation desk

at La Guardia Airport."

Napoleon Solo said, "I have to go do some packing too, April. Come on and I'll drive you home."

TWO
COILS OF DEATH

Cambridge graduates tend to dress rather conservatively, but Mark Slate was an exception. Although as reserved and polite as most educated Englishmen, he liked a bit of dash in his clothes. He bought his suits on Carnaby Street and was given to bright waistcoats and gaudy ties.

His old schoolmates wouldn't have recognized him as he walked from the door leading to the guest rooms of the *Casa del Lupe* into the inn's barroom. In place of his usual sartorial splendor he wore the typical Lombodia native garb of denims tucked into scuffed knee boots, loose, billowy-sleeved blouse and a black waist sash.

He was a slim, lithe man with the build of an athlete and the sensitive face of a poet. He was a bit of both, being a former member of England's Olympic ski team and also an excellent rock-and-roll singer.

He was relatively new to U.N.C.L.E.'s New York headquarters, having only recently been transferred from London headquarters, but he was an experienced member of the Network Command.

Taking a seat at the bar, he gazed about preoccupiedly. There wasn't much to gaze at. Because it was siesta time, the place was nearly empty. Two old men wearing serapes and sombreros dozed at a table with a bottle of tequila between them. A slim, dark girl in her late twenties with flashing eyes and a vivacious expression was polishing glasses behind the bar. She wore a bright red skirt and a white peasant blouse which left rounded, creamy shoulders entirely bare and exposed the swell of a firm lush bosom. She was barefoot and had bright red toenails.

The girl flashed white teeth in a smile of welcome as Slate took a bar stool. "*Buenos dias, amante*."

Slate was staring dreamily at the tequila bottle between the two old men.

The girl's smile became a frown. Reaching across the bar, she tapped his shoulder.

Slate glanced at her, his expression cleared and he smiled. "Oh, hello, Lupe. Did you say something?"

She told him with a pout, "I did not used to have such trouble getting your attention. At first you could hardly take your eyes from

Lupe."

"I still find the view stimulating," he assured her, running his gaze over her shapely figure with such open admiration that she blushed.

"Miguel will slip a knife between your ribs if he ever sees you look at me like that," she said.

"More likely if he hears you call me sweetheart," Slate said dryly.

"What's happened to Miguel, incidentally? I haven't noticed him around for the last few nights."

Lupe looked surprised. "He is here every night, as always. Like you and all the rest, he has only eyes for that thing since I made the mistake of allowing it to be put in." She gestured toward the television set on a corner shelf over the bar. "I should take it out. Even you pay so much attention to it, you haven't even noticed Miguel, let alone me. None of the men even see me since I got the thing, including Miguel."

"It's the novelty, Lupe. It'll wear off. You've only had it for a couple of months, haven't you? And I don't suppose most of your customers ever saw TV before."

"You have," she said. "In America everyone has TV. Yet you sit and stare at it every night just like the others."

Slate gave his lean jaw a contemplative rub.

"I guess I do," he admitted. "I don't know why, because most of the programs are reruns of things I've already seen. I guess I watch it because there isn't anything else to do here evenings."

"I never look at it," Lupe said.

"I can't stand the commercials. I close my ears every time one comes on. If the set had not been free, I would never have put it in."

"It didn't cost you anything?" Slate asked.

"The new TV station at Vina Rosa installed it free. They figure once the villagers get used to it, they will buy their own. I understand they have furnished free sets to many village taverns."

"Hmm," Slate said. "Somebody's made a study of American merchandising techniques. Build a taste by handing out a few free samples, then sell the product at an inflated price as soon as the public is hooked."

Lupe shrugged. "They say it is just for good will. You wish a drink?"

Slate shook his head. "I just came in to admire the scenery." He examined her bare shoulders with the air of an art connoisseur.

"You will succeed in making Miguel pull a knife on you yet," she said, making a face at him.

"Not Miguel," he said with a grin. "He and I are amigos."

"Then you better get that expression off your face," she warned. "Here he comes."

Slate turned to glance at the entrance from the street. A tall, handsome man dressed like Slate except that he wore a sombrero came through the door, humming. Without a word of greeting to either Slate or Lupe he took a stool next to Slate and stared at the blank screen of the television set.

"Why you not cutting bananas at this time of day, my love?" Lupe demanded.

The man continued to hum to himself, unheeding. Lupe glanced at Mark Slate, who had returned his attention to the tequila bottle and was gazing at it vacantly.

"Hey!" Lupe shouted.

Slate and Miguel both jumped and stared at her. The two old men popped awake and looked her way.

One of them lifted the bottle and poured tequila into both his comrade's and his own glass.

The girl was standing with balled fists on her hips, glaring from Miguel to Slate, then back again.

"You cannot even say hello?" she said to Miguel. "The silly glass screen is more interesting even when the set is off?"

Miguel showed strong white teeth in a placating smile. "I was just trying to think of words to compliment your beauty, my one." He glanced at Slate. "Buenos dias, Senor Slate."

"The same to you, Miguel. A drink for my friend, Lupe." He laid a bill on the bar.

Lupe placed a bottle and a glass before Miguel "Why you not at work?" she asked.

"It is siesta time."

"You spend your siesta walking clear to town? Five whole miles?"

"I could not rest, and I wished to feast my eyes on your loveliness."

He poured tequila and raised his glass to Slate, who acknowledged the toast with a smiling nod. Mollified, Lupe dropped her balled fists from her hips and reached across the bar to give Miguel a pat on the cheek.

"If your actions were as passionate as your words, you would be the ideal lover," she said. "You walk five miles to feast your eyes on me, yet when I am here to view each night, you do not even look. All you want to do any more is sit and watch that silly box."

Having tossed off his drink, Miguel was gazing at the vacant screen again and humming to himself. Lupe glanced at Mark Slate and saw he was again pensively staring at the tequila bottle between the two old men, who were dozing again.

With an impatient shrug Lupe went back to polishing glasses.

When April's plane landed at Vina Rosa, she discovered there was

no public transportation to San Cecilia, despite the village being only twenty miles away. There was a car-rental service at the airport, however, and she rented a two-year-old Ford.

The road to San Cecilia was paved and in good condition, but it was only one lane. When she met traffic coming from the other direction, it was necessary to pull off the road to let it pass. Since the road had been cut through dense jungle, this sometimes was a little scary. While trees had been cleared from both sides of the road for several yards, and spots where undergrowth had been scythed away indicated that some attempt was made to combat regrowth, the attempt wasn't nearly thorough enough. For most of the distance the undergrowth on both sides of the road was shoulder high, and it was necessary to force the car nearly off the road into this when she met another vehicle.

Unfortunately the car she had rented was a convertible and she had the top down. Every time she had to pull off the road, she wondered if the dense underbrush concealed some beast, which might leap into the car at any instant.

Actually she met motorized vehicles only once during the twenty-mile trip: a convoy of four trucks loaded with bananas. But several times she had to pull over to let by horse-drawn wagons or burro-drawn carts.

The road broadened to two lanes but became merely dirt when she reached the village limits.

The place consisted of merely a cluster of adobe huts lining both sides of the single street, plus a few larger adobe buildings. There was a general store with a single gas pump in front of it, a one-room schoolhouse, a large warehouse with several trucks parked before a loading platform in front of it and a long-low building with a wooden sign hanging over its entrance which read: *Casa Del Lupe*.

April parked in front of the inn, lifted her suitcase from the rear seat of the car and carried it inside.

There was a strikingly handsome, bare-shouldered brunette behind the bar. Two old men nodded at a corner table. Mark Slate, bareheaded and in native costume, sat at the bar. Next to him was a tall handsome man in similar dress, except that he also wore a sombrero.

Both men glanced her way when she dropped her suitcase to the floor with a muffled bang. The woman looked her way also, but the small noise failed to rouse the two old men from their stupors.

Mark Slate bounced from his stool and approached her with a wide grin.

"April, it's good to see you," he said.

When he reached out to clasp both her hands, she studied him

searchingly. She could detect nothing unusual about him. His expression was as alert and vital as ever.

"How are you, Mark?" she asked.

"Just fine, but getting a little bored, There isn't much to do here. Come meet my friends."

He lifted her suitcase and carried it over to set it next to the bar.

"This is Senorita Lupe Alfredo, April," he said, indicating the brunette behind the bar. "She is the proprietress of this picturesque inn. Miss April Dancer, Lupe."

The women exchanged polite greetings. Slate introduced the tall man as Miguel Flores. The latter rose, swept of his sombrero, bowed and said, "My pleasure, senorita. Senor Slate did not inform us his guest would be so beautiful."

Lupes' black eyes glittered at him. April was never one to discourage compliments from a handsome man, and this one was quite handsome, but on the verge of dimpling prettily and making some coquettish reply, she caught the expression on Lupe's face. She settled for a discreet smile.

Mark Slate said, "I told you Miss Dancer would be needing a room, didn't I, Lupe?"

The brunette frowned. "No, you did not, but the one next to you is vacant."

April was mildly surprised. It wasn't like Mark Slate to forget such a matter. However, it didn't matter, since a room was available.

"I'll show you your quarters," Slate said, picking up her suitcase and carrying it to a door at the rear of the room.

April followed him down a short hallway, past a bath to a corridor with several rooms off of it. As they passed one door, Mark Slate jerked his thumb at it and said "That's my pad."

He stopped before the next one, turned the knob and went in.

"No keys," he said. "San Cecilia is crimeless, so you don't have to worry about theft. The men tend to be a little romantic, though. As a practical solution to that, there is an inside bolt you may throw when you go to bed."

He put the suitcase on an old-fashioned brass bed which had a pile of feather ticks in lieu of a mattress. There was a marble-topped dresser, a wash stand, a writing table with a straight-backed chair in front of it, one ancient easy chair. The room was hardly luxurious, but it was immaculately clean.

April took a small, flesh-colored earplug from her purse and popped it into her ear. Slate smiled at her benignly.

"The place isn't bugged," he said. "In two weeks I haven't spotted anyone who could possibly be a THRUSH agent."

"They taught me at the Academy never to take anything for

granted," she said primly. "THRUSH has a habit of listening in when you least expect it."

"Hear any buzzing in your ear?" he asked in a patronizing voice.

"No," she admitted. She removed the earpiece and dropped it back into her purse. "Are you all right?"

He hiked his eyebrows. "Of course. Why do you ask?"

"You haven't instituted a report on your own in over a week. Mr. Waverly says he never hears from you unless he initiates contact."

Slate shrugged. "There's been nothing new to report."

April examined him narrowly.

"Then why do you hang around here? If you've observed everything there is to see, why haven't you moved on to some other village to check conditions there?"

"I don't have the answer to the puzzle here yet."

She continued to study him. "It just doesn't seem like you, Mark. Is that woman the magnet keeping you here?"

"Lupe?" Slate scoffed. "She's Miguel's girl. She likes to do a little flirting, but she doesn't get serious about anyone but him."

April still wasn't satisfied. "I don't understand it, Mark," she persisted. "Why are you staying here?"

"I told you I'm still trying to find the answer to the puzzle," he said with a touch of irritation. "Do you have a car?"

"Yes. How did you get here?" "On a banana truck. Suppose we use your car to run out where they're cutting bananas this afternoon, and you can see for yourself what we're up against." He frowned at her stylish dress and spike heels. "You had better change clothes for something more suitable for the jungle, though. Did you bring knee boots?"

"Yes. They were on the list furnished me by Mr. Waverly. I don't understand why I need them, though."

"Snakes," Slate said briefly.

April gazed at him wide-eyed. "Snakes?"

"They seldom strike above the knee. That is, if they're on the ground. You have to keep an eye out for the ones in branches."

April gave a delicate shudder.

"Are there many?"

"Enough to make it pay to be alert. Will you need long to change?"

"Ten minutes."

"I'll wait in the barroom. We may as well take Miguel back with us. He's a picker and just walked into town during the siesta period."

"All right," April said. "I'll hurry."

When April emerged from her room ten minutes later, she was wearing tight denim slacks, black riding boots, a long-sleeved blouse and a Stetson.

She found a small scene going on in the barroom. Every eye was on Lupe. Even the two old men at the table had awakened and were gaping at her. The shapely brunette was pounding on the bar and yelling at Miguel, who was rubbing his nose.

"Do you have another woman on your mind, son of a donkey?" Lupe inquired furiously. "Who is she, so that I may cut out her heart?"

"There is no other woman, my one," Miguel protested.

"Then why do you dream like a moonstruck cow? Why do you not even look at me, but just stare off into space, if you are not mooning over another woman?"

"I look at you, my one. Am I not looking at you now?"

"Bah!" Lupe spat. "After I tweak your nose to get your attention. Go back to your work. Dream of this slut of a female out of my sight. Go!"

With the shrug of a misunderstood man, Miguel headed for the door. Mark Slate gestured to April and they followed him out. Outside April handed Mark the car keys and climbed into the front seat of the Ford.

Slate rounded the car to slide under the wheel. April moved over to make room for Miguel to sit in front too, but he vaulted over the side of the convertible into the back seat.

"Women," Miguel muttered as he settled himself. "I have not so much as looked at anyone but Lupe. Senor Slate, have you ever seen me look at another woman?"

Slate started the car and pulled away. "Not in the flesh, amigo. You seem kind of taken by that chick on television. But I guess we all are."

"She of the dulcet voice? Ah, she is a one. But I do not moon of her, amigo. No woman but Lupe is on my mind."

"What chick are you talking about?" April asked Slate.

"Some dame who does a singing commercial on TV. She comes on about every half hour during the evening. And maybe in the afternoon too, for all I know. Lupe never turns on the set until evening."

"You mean she's so wonderful, she's a conversation piece even though all she does is a singing commercial?"

"Ah, but how she does it," Slate said. "She's such a sexy dish, every male customer at the inn stops conversation to watch her when she comes on. Even though it's a taped commercial and they see it a dozen times a night."

April sniffed. "So now we girls must compete with an electronic image? Flesh and blood women aren't enough competition?"

Slate edged the car over half off the road into the undergrowth to let a burro-drawn cart pass. While they waited, he grinned sidewise at her. "I didn't know you cared. I thought you regarded me as a big brother."

April eyed the foliage which pushed over the side of the car nearly into her lap dubiously. She edged nearer to Slate.

"With a brother like you, I would never have left home," she said in a bantering tone which didn't quite cover her nervousness.

Actually her relationship to Mark Slate was a little hard to define. She did regard him somewhat as a big brother, yet when other women showed that they were attracted to him–which was a frequent occurrence–she was often surprised to find herself becoming jealous. On the other hand, he never showed anything but amused interest when, she developed a passing crush on some man, and this lack of interest tended to irk her.

She enjoyed being with Mark Slate. They frequently went dining and dancing together when off duty. Whenever she thought about their relationship, she assured herself she hadn't the slightest romantic interest in him. Still–

The cart passed and Slate drove on. A low humming sound came from the back seat. April twisted around to look at Miguel. The man was staring straight ahead and humming a lilting catchy little tune she failed to recognize.

Slate said, "How did things go in Geneva?"

She turned her attention back to him and described the adventure in which she had been partly responsible for foiling the assassination plot against the director of the International Red Cross. Slate interrupted occasionally to ask a searching question.

April could detect nothing in his manner to suggest he wasn't his usual alert, intelligent self.

Randy Kovac's suggestion that Slate had perhaps fallen victim to the same apathy affecting the natives was wrong, she decided.

The grove where bananas were being picked was about five miles beyond the village, along the same one-lane concrete road April had taken from Vina Rosa. The siesta period was just ending when they arrived. A burly foreman was shouting for the men to go back to work and workers were stirring themselves from beneath the shade of trees and from underneath several trucks parked at the edge of the grove.

Slate parked behind one of the trucks. Miguel scurried from the back seat and ran over to a truck. From its bed he lifted a curved, wooden-handled knife and thrust it into his belt. Over one shoulder he slung a canvas hamper somewhat resembling the bags carried by newsboys, except that it was much larger, allowing it to ride on one hip…

April and Slate had climbed from the Ford and stood at the rear of the truck Slate had parked behind. April examined the grove. It contained banana trees of all sizes, ranging from some only a few feet tall whose fruit could be reached from the ground to giants towering

to forty feet.

As the ripe bunches of fruit hung mainly from the tops of trees, she was wondering how these giants were harvested when she saw several of the men carrying slim, light extension ladders made of tubular aluminum into the grove. Miguel was one of those carrying a ladder.

Seeing her looking Miguel's way, Slate said, "Miguel's a top worker. They get higher pay than the ground crews. But it's tough work. Top bunches average about twenty-five pounds, ground bunches about half that. Those hampers hold six top bunches or twelve ground bunches. So by the time a picker is ready to head for a truck and unload, he's lugging a hundred and fifty pounds on his back."

"Will we be able to see anything from here?" April asked.

"Not much. Just the top workers. You have to get in there to really see how they work."

"Then let's go in."

One of the curved banana knives lay in the bed of the truck they stood next to. Slate picked it up.

"Okay," he said. "I'll cut' you a nice juicy banana."

He moved into the grove, pushing aside foliage with his hands. April followed after him. There was little underbrush, but there were numerous banana tree shoots with leafy tops, so that the ground was virtually invisible. April kept thinking of snakes as she followed Slate toward the sound of the pickers.

They stopped to watch a pair of top workers first. Two sections of light ladder had been fitted together and a man thirty feet in the air was cutting hunches and expertly flipping them into his hamper. A man on the ground steadied the ladder.

April recognized the man on the ground as Miguel.

"They work in pairs," Slate explained. "Next tree Miguel will be on top and the guy up there now will act as his ground assistant. He's necessary for a little more than just steadying the ladder, incidentally. You'll see what I mean in a minute."

The man on the ladder filled his hamper and lowered it by rope to the ground. April noted that Miguel was staring off into space and humming the same lilting little tune he had hummed in the car. He paid no attention when the full hamper reached the ground next to him.

"Hey, Miguel!" the man above shouted.

Miguel blinked, saw the hamper on the ground and stooped to unhook the rope. Quickly he unslung the hamper hanging from his own shoulder and attached it to the rope. The man above pulled it up, hung it from his shoulder, then swung himself from the ladder to cling to the bole of the tree thirty feet above the ground.

Miguel shifted the position of the ladder to the other side of the

tree and the top worker swung himself back upon it.

Slate and April moved on through the leafy foliage until they came to a group of four ground workers.

Two were moving along briskly, cutting bunches and dropping them into their hampers. The other two were standing idle, staring into space.

The burly foreman came along and yelled, “Sons of donkeys! Are you paid to stand and dream?”

The two men started, then hurriedly resumed work. The foreman stood glaring at them.

“Afternoon, Jose,” Mark Slate said. “Still having worker trouble, eh?”

The big man’s frown turned to a friendly smile. “Ah, Senor Slate. Yes. The lazy pigs work only when I yell at them. They would dream away the day if I were not constantly on their backs.”

He looked at April curiously. Slate said, “This is Jose Diaz, April. Miss April Dancer, Jose.”

The foreman acknowledged the introduction with a gracious Latin bow.

But at that moment he spotted a pair of top workers who had paused in the act of joining two sections of ladder together and were vacantly staring off into space.

“Loafers!” he yelled, striding to-ward them. “The siesta is over!”

“Seen enough to get the idea?”

Slate asked.

“What is the matter with them?” she said. “They just seem to drift off into daydreams.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out for two weeks,” he said, shrugging. “A drug of some kind is out, because they snap alert the moment you yell at them.”

He reached up, cut a pair of plump bananas from a bunch and handed one to April. As she started to peel it, something soft but heavy slithered across her shoulder from behind. Before she could react, massive coils had whipped about her throat, chest and waist.

A huge head with fanged jaws poised not a foot from her face, ready to strike. To her horror she saw that the head was pointed. She knew little of snakes, but she knew a pointed head was supposed to mean the serpent was venomous.

The banana knife in Mark Slate’s hand moved in a glittering blur. There was a snicking sound and the severed head of the enormous snake flew six feet away to land on the ground. The coils momentarily constricted, squeezing the breath from April, then slithered loosely to the ground.

Jumping from the circle of still writhing coils, she backed away in

terror. The dark-colored monster was over twelve feet long.

"Boa constrictor," Slate said. "They grow to fifteen feet."

April found that the banana in her hand was crushed to a pulp. She dropped it to the ground.

"Let's get out of here," she said, and headed for the Ford at a rapid walk.

THREE
THE VOICE

April was already in the car when Slate came from the grove. He was eating his banana. He casually tossed the banana knife into the rear of the truck, finished the banana and discarded the skin before climbing under the wheel.

April looked at him reproachfully.

"I warned you there were snakes," he said. "Fortunately boas aren't poisonous."

"They aren't?" she said. "He had a pointed head."

"One of the few non-poisonous snakes with a pointy head. They just squeeze you until you pop out of your skin like a bursting tube of toothpaste. "

"Please spare me descriptions," she said with a shudder.

"They bite too, even though they aren't poisonous. I think he was getting ready to nibble off your pretty little nose when I separated his head from his body."

"Please, Mark, you're making me sick. Will you shut up?"

Sorry," he said cheerfully.

"Just showing off my knowledge."

He started the car, backed and turned and headed back toward the village.

April took out of her purse what looked like an ordinary fountain pen, twisted the barrel and a small chromium antenna shot up from one end.

She said, "Section two, please. Scramble."

After a moment the voice of Alexander Waverly said, "Yes, Miss Dancer?"

"I have arrived at San Cecilia and am with Mark Slate," April reported. "He seems to be entirely all right. As a matter of fact he's driving the car we're in now. We're just returning from a visit to a banana grove."

"I am glad to hear Mr. Slate has not succumbed to the curious epidemic which seems to be raging down there," Waverly said. "Have you anything new to report?"

"Only to confirm what Mark has already told you, sir. The natives

stop working and drift off into daydreams every so often, yet seem perfectly normal as soon as their attention is recaptured."

"Hmm. You have no hint of the reason?"

"No, sir."

"Well, keep working on it. Anything else?"

"Only that this place is full of snakes."

"Snakes?"

"Yes, sir. A great big one over a dozen feet long just tried to eat me. If Mark hadn't been there to rescue me, I would be inside his stomach now."

Alexander Waverly's voice showed no surprise. He said mildly, "Good for Mr. Slate. I would hate to lose a top agent to a snake. I will be awaiting further report from you."

April stared at the pen-communicator. When no more was forthcoming, said, "Yes, sir," and snappishly broke the connection.

Putting away the pen, she said, "A girl certainly doesn't get much sympathy in this business."

"He knows you're all right under my protection," Mark Slate said modestly.

"Fathead," April muttered under her breath.

When they arrived back at the village, April had a bath in the inn's one and only bathtub and put on a plain but attractive print dress. By then it was nearing dinner time. She rapped on Mark Slate's door.

When there was no answer, she rapped again, waited a minute and rapped a third time. Deciding he must be in the bar, she was turning away when the door finally opened. Slate peered out at her.

"Were you napping?" she asked.

"No, just sitting."

"Oh," she said. "It took you so long to answer the door, I thought you must have been asleep."

Slate looked surprised. "I answered it as soon as you knocked."

April frowned at him. "I had to knock three times, Mark."

He gave a smiling shrug. "You should practice knocking louder. I only heard the last one. What's up?"

"Nothing urgent. I just thought you might like to take me to dinner."

"Sure," he said, moving into the hall and closing the door behind him. "What is today?"

"Saturday."

"Then it's steak on the menu. Lupe's a pretty good cook."

They went out into the tavern together and took a corner table. Lupe seemed to have no employees, because in addition to her bartending duties she acted as waitress and cook. This didn't put a great strain on her, however, because the inn's dinner business was

very small.

Only three other customers, all male, came in during the whole dinner hour.

The steak picado was delicious. Afterward they sat sipping a homemade banana wine which was a specialty of the house, and which was the only liquor aside from tequila, mescal and beer offered for sale.

"We may as well spend the evening here," Slate suggested. "There isn't anywhere else to go in town."

"It's all right with me," April told him. "My tastes are simple."

They remained at the same corner table. By eight the place was packed, but the customers had come only to drink, not to eat. Apparently San Cecilians were used to dining early and to eating at home.

The clientele was predominantly male, but a few women were sprinkled through the crowd. All seemed to be either wives or sweethearts of male customers. There were no unescorted women.

"It's Lupe's TV set which draws them in," Slate said. "It's really their only form of entertainment. Eight is the magic hour."

When April Dancer raised her eyebrows inquiringly, Slate said, "Programming doesn't go around the clock. TV is relatively new in Lombodia and there's only one broadcasting studio. Lupe hasn't had the set on previously, because after the five-o'clock news broadcast, there are no programs on until eight."

April glanced toward the set and saw that Lupe was just switching it on.

Up to now April and Slate had been animatedly discussing everything from the strange periodic preoccupation of the natives to the latest New York shows. For the first time since they had sat down to dinner together, Slate momentarily shifted his attention from her to glance at the television screen. He made a face and turned back to her.

"Repeat of an old *Our Miss Brooks* show," he said. "I've seen it."

April glanced at the screen and realized she had seen it also. Apparently it was new to the other customers, though, because when she looked around, she saw that every other eye in the place except Lupe's was glued to the screen. Lupe, behind the bar, was staring with irritation at Miguel, who was seated on a bar stool and was paying no attention to her.

Turning back to Slate, she said in a low voice, "Will they object if we continue talking?"

"We'd better keep our voices down," he said in an equally low voice. "They're all TV addicts."

The teaser ended at that moment and a commercial came on. April would have expected general conversation to resume at that point, but

to her surprise the attentive silence actually seemed to deepen.

It was a singing commercial, sung by a dark, beautiful, husky-voiced woman with strangely arresting eyes. April knew immediately that this must be the woman whom Mark Slate had told her so intrigued male viewers.

She was of indeterminate age. She might have been twenty-five or forty. She was one of those ageless women who retain their beauty until they are actually old, April decided with a touch of envy. Her slim but voluptuous figure was encased in a low-cut black sheath which fitted her beautifully.

She *was* sexy, April Dancer had to admit.

The commercial started with a full shot of the woman standing before a white drop which outlined her black-clad figure in detail. An intimate smile formed on her face as she began to sing. Then the camera slowly panned in on her as she sang until only her hypnotic eyes filled the Screen as she reached the last note. The jingle she sang was as far from poetry as those which are inflicted on American viewing audiences, but it was so insistently demanding of attention that it was impossible not to listen.

The words of the jingle went:

Munch, munch, munch,
Crunch, crunch, crunch,
Eat' em singly or by the bunch.
Dip 'em, then lip 'em and gobble
'em down:
Lito's Fritos are the best in town.

The tune accompanying the jingle was like a clarion call from heaven, impossible to ignore, impossible to blank from the mind. As it ended, the camera pulled back until the woman was shown at full length again, she smiled seductively and repeated it. Altogether she sang it three times, her face growing in the camera until only her hypnotic eyes showed each time.

April recognized the tune as the one Miguel had been humming in the car, and which he had later been humming as he leaned against the ladder in the banana grove and stared into space. A monstrous suspicion began to grow in her mind.

Tearing her gaze from the screen, she glanced around the room. Every male eye in the place was fixed on the screen in fascination. None of the women were looking at it, however. They were all frowning at their escorts with a mixture of puzzlement and jealousy.

When the commercial ended, many of the men's eyes drifted away

from the screen and simply stared into space. April got the impression that even those still looking at the screen were unaware that the show had resumed. They all seemed lost in their own thoughts.

She turned her head toward Mark Slate and found him still gazing at the screen.

"Mark," she said.

His fingers drummed rhythmically on the table top. "Munch, munch, munch," he crooned in a low voice. "Eat 'em singly or by the bunch."

To her horror April realized that Slate had succumbed to the strange epidemic after all. She hadn't guessed it sooner simply because up until this moment she had managed to engross his full attention every instant she had been with him.

"Mark!" April said sharply. Starting, he glanced at her.

"Let's get out of here," she said. "I want to talk to you."

"Sure," he said agreeably, rising from his chair and tossing a couple of bills on the table. "There's nowhere else to go, though, unless you'll settle for a romantic walk in the moonlight."

"That's what I had in mind," she said, rising and picking up her purse.

No one paid any attention to their departure.

Outside the air was balmy and there was a bright, tropical full moon. They strolled a few yards down the street and stopped in the shadows of an adobe hut. April gazed up at the moon.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" she said. Slate made no answer. When she glanced at him, he wasn't looking at the moon, but was staring blankly into space.

She had brought him outside only partly because she wanted to talk to him. She had also wanted to make a little test.

"Mark," she said softly.

There was no answer. He merely continued to stare off into space as though he were alone.

In a conversational tone April said, "Mr. Waverly has taken up sky-diving. Every Sunday afternoon he parachutes into the Hudson River wearing a pink bathing suit. "

Slate said nothing.

"Randy Kovac is engaged to a forty-year-old stripper," April said. "Napoleon Solo is to be best man and will wear a sequined dress suit he borrowed from Liberace."

No reaction.

"Illya Kuryakin resigned from U.N.C.L.E. and entered a monastery in Tibet as a monk," April said.

In a low voice Slate began to hum a lilting tune.

"Mark!" April nearly yelled. With a start Slate turned to face her. "I

was listening," he said defensively. "You said–" His eyes grew round. "Mr. Waverly is taking up *what*?"

"Never mind," she said. "I was just testing to see how far away from reality you were."

"What do you mean?" he said with a frown.

"Aren't you even aware that you're suffering from the same mental malady as the natives?"

His expression became puzzled."Me?"

"You," she assured him. "It took me a time to realize it, because you didn't happen to go into a trance until a few minutes ago. Apparently that's because victims drift off into daydreams only when their minds become momentarily idle, and yours hasn't had a chance to drift since I arrived. You've been constantly distracted from dwelling on your inner thoughts ever since I arrived."

"Distracted from my inner thoughts?"

"Uh-huh. When I first walked into Lupe's, I dropped my suitcase and the noise made you look at me. You were busy introducing me to your friends and showing me my room for the next few minutes. Then, when you went back to the barroom to wait while I changed, Lupe's outburst at Miguel kept you from retreating into your own mind again. After that you had to concentrate on your driving when we drove to the banana grove, and our conversation about my Geneva trip further distracted you.

"We continued to have steady conversation all the time we were there, except while you were be-heading that snake, and that incident wasn't the sort you're likely to drift off into a daydream in the middle of. We kept up a steady conversation all the way back from the village, all through dinner and right up to that TV commercial. Don't you see?"

"I see that you're admitting you talk a lot," Slate said. "Otherwise you're escaping me."

April said patiently, "That woman on TV is exercising mass hypnotism. By repetition she's implanted that silly jingle in everybody's mind until they can't get it out. It keeps running through their minds all day long whenever there is nothing else to distract their attention. As long as you're actively conversing with someone, or doing something which requires close concentration, like driving a car, you don't think of it. But the moment you relax, the tune starts running through your mind again and you drift off into a daydream."

Mark Slate gave his jaw a thoughtful rub. "It's pretty catchy," he admitted. "Now that you mention it, I do find myself humming it frequently. But I wasn't aware–"

His voice drifted off and he stared past her shoulder with a preoccupied expression on his face. She gave him a light slap and he

blinked.

"You're right," he said with awe. "Because we were talking about the tune, I drifted off and started mentally humming it again right in the middle of our conversation. You've guessed the answer to the puzzle. Everybody in this country is going around mentally humming that blasted commercial. Working at a routine job like banana picking, it's easy to let your thoughts wander, and the next thing you know, you're standing there, staring into space and humming. No wonder production has gone down the drain."

"It doesn't seem to affect women," April said. "Only men."

"Women don't watch her. Probably they're a little jealous of her. Why couldn't I have guessed the answer two weeks ago, the first time I saw that gal on TV?"

"Because you're a man," April told him. "Men are never as suspicious of beautiful women as other women are. The insidious thing about this technique is that no one realizes he's been brainwashed. Even as intelligent as you are, you never realized anything was wrong with you, did you?"

Slate groaned. "Do you suppose I'm condemned to think about that silly jingle every time I let my attention wander for the rest of my life?"

"We'll have an U.N.C.L.E. psychiatrist do some counter-brain-washing," April said. "Since we have the answer to the puzzle, there's no point in sticking around here any longer. Let's drive to Vina Rosa tonight and catch a plane for New York."

"Right," Slate said decisively.

"Let's go pack right now."

The customers in the barroom were all still engrossed in the television show when they reentered. No one paid any attention to them. Slate stopped at the bar to settle their accounts with Lupe and tell the proprietress they were checking out. April went on to her room and began packing.

Fifteen minutes later, when April had finished packing and had carried her suitcase into Slate's room, she found him sitting on the bed, staring into space. His open suitcase lay on the bed, half packed, and he held a pair of socks in his hand.

With a sigh she shook his shoulder.

He looked up, surprised, then smiled sheepishly.

"It got to me again," he said. "Better help me pack, then keep talking to me all the way to New York."

Mark Slate was the only one seated in the conference room at New York's U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. Standing in a circle around him were

Alexander Waverly, young Randy Kovac, April and a plump, placid looking man of middle-age who wore gold-rimmed glasses.

"You suggest hypnosis then, Dr. Brow?" Mr. Waverly said.

"If the patient is willing," the psychiatrist said. "And if he can be hypnotized. Not everyone can."

Randy Kovac said dubiously, "Mr. Slate is pretty strong-minded."

"Strong-minded people make the best subjects," Dr. Brow informed him. "It requires concentration to accept hypnosis. How do you feel about it, Mr. Slate?"

Mark Slate was gazing preoccupiedly at April's left foot. He didn't answer.

"Mark!" April said.

Slate blinked, then glanced at the doctor. "Oh, yes, sir. I heard you. Sure, I'm willing, if you think it will work."

The doctor moved before him, took a dime from his pocket and held it before the seated man's eyes. "Just concentrate on this dime, Mr. Slate. Try to blank your mind of everything but the dime. Can you do that?"

"Yes, sir," Slate said. "I'm thinking only of the dime."

The doctor held the coin so that light from an overhead lamp reflected in Slate's eyes, then slowly began to twist it back and forth.

In a soothing voice he said, "Keep watching, Mr. Slate. Concentrate as hard as you can. Now keep your eyes on the dime, but stop thinking about it. Instead concentrate on what I am saying."

"All right," Slate agreed.

"You will hear and pay attention only to my voice, Mr. Slate. Keep concentrating on it and listen very carefully. You are becoming sleepy. Very, very sleepy. How do you feel?"

"Sleepy," Slate said tonelessly. The doctor dropped the dime in his pocket and passed a hand before the seated man's eyes. The eyes stared straight ahead, unblinking.

"Remarkable," the psychiatrist said. "One of the quickest hypnotic trances I have ever induced. This man has extreme powers of concentration. Can you hear me, Mr. Slate?"

"Yes."

"Place your right hand on top of your head."

Slate placed his right hand on top of his head. Catching a movement from the corner of her eye, April glanced at Randy Kovac. The teen-ager was staring blankly straight ahead and had his hand on top of his head also.

"You may drop your arm to your side," Dr. Brow said.

Both Slate and Randy dropped their arms.

"Now, Mr. Slate, there is a certain singing commercial with which you are familiar concerning a product called Lito's Fritos. Do you

know what I am talking about?"

"Yes," Slate said tonelessly. "Sing it, please."

In an excellent baritone Slate sang, "Munch, munch, munch-crunch, crunch, crunch; eat 'em singly or by the bunch–Dip 'em, then lip 'em and gobble 'em down; Lito's Fritos are the best in town."

"Good heavens!" Mr. Waverly said under his breath. "Imagine having that running through your mind twenty-four hours a day. It's the ultimate secret weapon!"

Dr. Brow frowned at him and Waverly looked apologetic.

"That is the last time you will ever sing that jingle," the psychiatrist said. "When you awaken, you will remember neither the words nor the tune. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I will remember neither the words nor the tune."

Dr. Brow snapped his fingers in front of Slate's face. Slate blinked and glanced around curiously.

The psychiatrist said, "Will you sing the Lito's Fritos commercial for us, Mr. Slate?"

Slate looked at him puzzledly. "What commercial?"

Dr. Brow threw Waverly a satisfied smile. April cleared her throat and jerked a thumb at Randy Kovac. Everyone looked that way. The boy still stood staring blankly straight ahead.

"Apparently Mr. Kovac is another excellent subject," Mr. Waverly said. "Bring him out of that, please, doctor."

The psychiatrist snapped his fingers in front of Randy's face. The boy blinked, then glanced at Mark Slate.

"Is he under?" he inquired.

"Under and up again," Waverly informed him. "You decided to accompany him on the trip."

"No fooling?" Randy said in awe. "You mean I was hypnotized too?"

"Yeah," Slate said. "You must be as strong-minded as I am."

April said dryly, "Your strength of mind is exceeded only by your becoming modesty, Mark."

Alexander Waverly broke off the small talk by saying, "Thank you, doctor. Mr. Slate and Miss Dancer, I will see you both in my office now."

FOUR
VALLEY OF THE DAMNED

A few minutes later April and Slate sat before Mr. Waverly's enormous oval desk. Randy Kovac, who had trailed along, hovered discreetly near the door, hoping he wouldn't be sent from the room.

Waverly glanced at him and decided to let him stay.

Leaning back in his chair, Waverly formed his fingertips into a pointed arch.

"Research has come up with some interesting information on TV station CIX in Vina Rosa," he said. "The station is owned by Lombodia Airwaves, Inc., which is also a producer of commercial films and tapes. Lombodia Airwaves in turn is owned by a dummy company which we are reasonably certain is controlled by THRUSH."

"THRUSH again," Slate said sourly. "We might have known."

"The president of Lombodia Airwaves is an ex-Hollywood director named Sancho Moreno," Waverly continued. "He was blackballed in Hollywood some years back because of subversive activities in connection with an organization we have since discovered was a THRUSH front. There is excellent evidence that he is a top THRUSH agent."

April said, "Did Research come up with anything on the woman hypnotist who sings the Fritos commercial?"

"Considerable. She is, as you guessed, a professional hypnotist. Some years back she had a nightclub act in which she hypnotized the entire audience and then made members flap their arms and quack like ducks and do other such nonsense. Her name is Consuelo Cortez."

After absorbing this, April asked, "What do you suppose their purpose is in drumming this jingle into the brains of the poor Lombodians? What will it get them to send Lombodia into an economic slump?"

"We can only conjecture at this point," Waverly said. "But I suspect they are merely experimenting with the effect of the jingle at present. Probably the eventual plan is to flood the air waves of the more developed nations with it. Can you imagine what the economic effect would be on the United States if its productive capacity suddenly dropped twenty-five percent because its production workers were all daydreaming about Lito's Fritos?"

Randy Kovac ventured farther into the room. "Depression," he said. "A spiral effect would set in, just like during the great depression of the thirties. We studied that in Economics II. When production fans off, there has to be layoffs. Layoffs mean less purchasing power, which means fewer sales. This results in more layoffs and the thing keeps spiraling downward until you have mass unemployment and thousands of businesses going bankrupt because they have lost their customers."

"I didn't realize you were such a student of economics, Mr. Kovac," Waverly said dryly. "But you have capsuled the danger admirably. This program must be stopped at all costs."

"What are your plans, sir?" Slate asked.

"You and Miss Dancer will return to Lombodia at once and sabotage this insidious plan. The method I leave to you. But it must be sabotaged. Understand?"

Both Slate and April said, "Yes, sir."

"One more thing, Mr. Slate," Waverly said.

"Yes, sir?"

"Do not under any circumstances listen to or watch any more television commercials."

Vina Rosa was a rather languid community of about fifty thousand, considerably larger geographically than you would expect of a town that size because it had grown outward instead of upward like most American cities. The homes, for the most part, were old-fashioned and were constructed of either frame or adobe brick. A few modern ranch-style houses of stucco had been built by newcomers, mainly by the executives of American owned rubber and fruit companies. There were few apartment houses, and none of them were more than six-unit buildings or more than two stories tall. As the population grew, the city planners didn't think in terms of high-rise buildings. They simply cleared more of the jungle and built more one-story houses.

The only large industries were rubber and fruit processing plants.

April's and Slate's plane landed at eleven in the morning. They taxied to the Hotel La Paz, the city's tallest building–it towered four stories above the street–and managed to get adjoining rooms, on the second floor.

When they were settled, they went downstairs to lunch in the hotel dining room.

When they had given their orders, Slate said to the waiter, "Do you happen to know if Station CIX allows visitors?"

"The television studio? Yes, senor. They have a conducted tour each Tuesday from three to four."

"Today?" Slate said.

"Yes, senor." The waiter glanced at a wall clock. "The tour will start in about three hours."

Slate glanced at April. "Feel like a tour, senorita?"

April Dancer smiled at him. "We're tourists, aren't we? Why not?"

Lombodia Airwaves, Inc. was an example of the spendthrift use of land in Vina Rosa resulting from the unlimited amount of land available around it, providing you had the energy and resources to clear away jungle growth. There was the equivalent of a square city block surrounded by a ten-foot-high wire mesh fence. A quarter of that space would have served, because the enclosure contained only a half dozen one-story frame buildings, all square and flat-topped, with graveled walks running between them.

The free-wheeling use of land was all the more striking because the studio was located in a busy commercial section of town with a main street fronting it.

April and Slate were both dressed as tourists. Slate wore one of his Carnaby Street suits with a checkered vest and a red tie. He had on a narrow-brimmed fedora with a small red feather in its band and carried a camera slung from his shoulder.

April was dressed as a tourist trying to look like a native. She wore thong sandals on stockingless feet, a red dirndl and a white peasant blouse which exposed her slim shoulders. Her hair was done in a style no Lombodian woman ever wore, though. She had it tied into a pony tail by a red ribbon. For a purse she carried a straw handbag.

Their taxi let them out in front of the main gate to the studio. There was a guard on the gate and three other couples were waiting to take the conducted tour. By their dress and speech two of the couples seemed to be Lombodians. The third pair were well-dressed, middle-aged Americans.

April and Slate were requested by the guard to sign a guest book. April signed first. There were several columns, all of which had to be filled in, the guard informed them. The book asked for name, local address, occupation and, for foreigners, home address and the reason for being in Lombodia.

It seemed rather detailed information to give just to go on a studio tour, but April dutifully filled it in. Under “occupation” she had the impulse to write “spy” but decided to put down “secretary” instead. Under “reason for being in Lombodia” she wrote, “Vacation.”

The American couple, she noted, were a Mr. and Mrs. George Bishop, originally of Miami, now residents of Vina Rosa. George Bishop had entered that he was vice president of a local fruit packing firm; his wife had listed herself as a housewife.

She watched over Mark Slate’s shoulder as he registered. He listed himself as a salesman.

By the time Slate had finished registering, their studio guide had appeared. He was a lean, wire-haired man of about thirty who wore a welcoming smile which failed to reach his eyes. The latter were as cold and expressionless as clams on the half-shell.

“My name is Pedro Martinez,” he announced in a rather flat voice. “I will be your guide on this tour. Please stick together and do not stray off by yourselves. This way, please.”

He turned and led the way toward the first building. The tour members fell in behind him in double file, April and Slate bringing up the rear of the column.

“I would hate to meet our guide in a dark alley,” Slate whispered to April. “Pedro is a hood if I ever saw one. Notice that bulge under

his arm?"

"Uh-huh," April said, "He's carrying a gun. Odd for a studio guide."

"Not with THRUSH in the offing," Slate said. "And I smell THRUSH strong and clear around here."

The first building was the administration building. There was a central hall with offices off each side of it. Pedro Martinez announced the purpose of each office as they came to it and opened each door to let the group peer in.

April overheard Mrs. Bishop whisper to her husband, "This isn't what I wanted to see. It's just offices. I want to see where they make films and where they broadcast. "

April sympathized with her. So far the tour wasn't very inspiring.

Her interest quickened when they paused before the door of a large office halfway along the hall and Pedro announced that this was the office of company president Sancho Moreno.

The door had a transparent upper pane. Their guide didn't open this door, but through the glass they could see a thick-shouldered, heavy featured man with beetling black brows seated behind a desk.

When they reached the end of the hall and started out the door opposite the one by which they had come in, April glanced back. The beetle-browed Moreno came from his office at that moment, glanced their way, then turned in the other direction to exit from the building by the door through which the tour group had entered.

The next building they visited was the broadcasting studio. There was one large studio room and two small ones. Only one of the small ones was in use at the moment, for a newscast. Through a glass viewing panel they watched the newscaster read his lines from a teleprompter and simultaneously they saw his image and heard his voice coming from a monitor in the hall.

The guide showed them through the large studio room, which was vacant, took them into the control room and explained what the sound and video engineers did there.

As they exited from the building, April saw Sancho Moreno just entering the next nearest one.

Their guide announced, "We will now visit the area where films and tapes are shot. I must caution you to be quiet if any shooting is going on."

He led the way toward the building into which the company president had disappeared, but walked right past its entrance toward the next building.

Fruit company executive George Bishop said, "Hey, what's in there?"

"Research," the guide said briefly. "Off-limits."

April and Slate exchanged glances. As the guide led the way into the next building, they waited until the third couple had disappeared inside and the door had closed behind them, then turned and walked quickly back to the building they had just passed.

Mark Slate eased the door open and glanced into an empty hallway. He slipped inside and motioned for April to follow. There were several doors off either side of the hall, some open, some closed.

Slate eased his head around the edge of the nearest open door and found it to be a vacant office. Crossing the hall to a closed door, he pressed his ear to it, then made a gesture to April indicating that someone was inside.

Dropping to his knees, he peered through the keyhole for several seconds. When he rose, he whispered, “Sancho Moreno talking to some guy.”

April bent to peer through the keyhole and found a desk in her field of vision. A thin, cadaverous man with a skull-like face and thick-lensed glasses which enormously magnified his eyes sat behind a desk facing her. This side of the desk, profile to her, sat the beetle-browed Sancho Moreno.

She could hear the rumbling of Moreno’s voice, but the door was too thick for her to make out what he was saying. His tone and expression indicated dissatisfaction with something or somebody, though.

Slapping his hand on the desk, Moreno heaved to his feet, snapped something at the skull-faced man and started for the door.

April came erect, made a frantic gesture to Slate and ran toward the next closed door on tiptoe. There was no time to check to see if the room was occupied. There was time only to push the door open and dart inside.

Mark Slate crowded in behind her and swung the door nearly closed, leaving only a crack. Glancing around, April saw that they had made a lucky choice of a hiding place. They were in a small storeroom whose shelves were loaded with cleaning supplies. Light came from a single narrow window near the ceiling.

In a low voice Slate said, “He walked by and went into the room next door.”

He was easing the door open again when April tapped his shoulder. When he looked around, she silently gestured with her thumb at a grill ventilator set high in the wall between the storeroom and the room next door.

Slate gently clicked the door shut and glanced around the storeroom. A large cardboard case labeled *Paper Towels* caught his eye. Standing it on end, he started to drag it beneath the ventilator grill, then winced and halted at the rasping noise it made on the floor.

Throwing an apprehensive look at the ventilator grill, he listened.

April listened too. They could hear a low sound of conversation coming through the grill from the room next door, but apparently the rasping sound hadn't been heard over there.

Slate gestured April to get on the other side of the case. Together they lifted it clear of the floor and eased it down again beneath the ventilator.

The upper end of the case was about three feet by two. Slate lightly vaulted up on it, then held his hand to April to pull her up too. They stood side-by-side, his arm steadying her around the waist, and peered through the ventilator grill.

The room next door was large and there was a long table facing the windows. Three men, their profiles to April and Slate sat at the table with note pads before them and pencils in their hands. They had identically low foreheads and wore identically vacant expressions, yet all seemed to be concentrating painfully. Occasionally one or the other would jot down a word or two.

Behind them stood Sancho Moreno and a gross, hairy man carrying a riding whip. Moreno was examining a couple of sheets of paper bearing what looked like penciled scrawls.

"Is this all they've turned out in a week?" he rumbled in disgust. "This stuff isn't even comprehensible. It sounds like the drooling of an idiot."

"Well, they *are* mentally retarded," the man with the whip said. "It's what you wanted. Why don't you hire some real writers and musicians?"

"Professionals couldn't turn out the sort of stuff we want," Moreno said impatiently. "It takes a retarded mind. This is a slow process, but they always come through eventually. Maybe you haven't been keeping them at it hard enough."

The hairy man flicked his whip through the air. "I lay it on every time that concentrated look disappears from their faces. Which is often. They can't follow a train of thought very long at a stretch."

Sancho Moreno crumpled up the papers he had been examining and tossed them into a waste basket next to the long table. He was turning toward the door when it opened. The thin, cadaverous man Moreno had been talking to in the other office led in a hulking, blank-eyed man wearing a vacuous grin.

The hairy man with the whip glowered at the new arrival.

"Another graduate from the home for the mentally retarded?" he said in disgust. "My God, I'm beginning to feel like a zoo keeper. He looks even more stupid than the others."

"He is," the skull-faced man said with an air of pride. "The processing section grades him as a sublevel moron."

"Does he know what he's supposed to do?" Moreno asked.

"Oh, yes. He's completed orientation, including his full two weeks of listening to singing commercials. Carlos, what is your job?"

The hulking man turned his vacuous grin at the man with thick glasses. "Duh–write some singing commercials."

"Put him to work," Moreno ordered the man with the whip. "Barth, see if Consuelo is in her office and send her in."

"Yes, sir," the skull-faced man said.

As the cadaverous Barth went out, the hairy man led Carlos over to, the long table, made him sit, placed a note pad before him and handed him a pencil.

"Start to work," he ordered.

"Every time you let your mind wander, you get this."

He brought his riding whip down across the man's shoulders with a light but stinging flick. The hulking man pouted and looked up with tear-filled eyes.

"Why you hit Carlos?" he asked reproachfully. "I work good. You see."

"You'd better," the hairy man told him.

He glanced at the other workers, gave the table a threatening crack with the whip and turned away.

The door reopened and a slim but voluptuous woman entered. April recognized her as the woman of the televised singing commercial.

In person Consuelo Cortez was just as seductive looking as she had been on the screen. She still wore black, but now it was a simple street dress with a high neck instead of an evening gown. Her dark complexion was flawless.

April Dancer still was unable to judge her age, but she decided it couldn't be over thirty with a complexion like that.

There was one difference in her in person. Without the intimate smile she had shown on camera, her face was strangely expressionless and her eyes were as flat as some predatory beast's.

She said in her husky voice, "You wanted to see me, Sancho?"

"Yes," Moreno said. "I've received word from Central Headquarters to speed this operation up. They've decided not to wait until we have six commercials in the can. They want us to shoot the two we have aside from the Lito's Fritos jingle and ship them as soon as possible."

The woman frowned. "That will only be three."

"The schedule has been moved up. They can't wait until we've taped all six. It may be weeks before this idiot crew of writers manages to turn out three more acceptable ones. Orders are to tape the two others we have and ship them to *Wescott and Coombs*

immediately, so that they can begin to appear on American networks."

The name *Wescott and Coombs* was familiar to April. It was a Madison Avenue advertising agency. She was thinking that it would interest Mr. Waverly to know that *Wescott and Coombs* was a THRUSH subsidiary, when the door behind them suddenly opened.

Their tour guide, the cold-eyed Pedro Martinez, stood in the doorway. When April and Slate glanced around, his hand darted beneath his coat and came out again holding a thirty-eight caliber automatic. Slate, with his arm about April's waist, had no chance to reach for his U.N.C.L.E. gun.

Slate and April both slowly raised their hands.

"Aha!" the guide said. "Did you think you would not be missed from the tour? Come down from there."

Slate jumped to the floor and held up both hands to help April down. Then both re-elevated their hands.

Pedro raised his voice to shout, "Hey! Anybody around?"

He backed into the hall and gestured with his gun for April and Slate to follow. As they stepped into the hall, Moreno and Consuela emerged from the room next door. The hairy man with the whip peered out, but Moreno gestured him to go back inside and supervise his charges. The skull-faced man looked from his office down the hall, then came over to see what was going on.

"What is this, Pedro?" Moreno demanded.

"These two took the visitor's tour," the guide said. "They disappeared en route, so I turned the tour over to Juan and came looking for them. I caught them in the storeroom standing on a box, looking through the grill into the room you just came from."

Moreno looked at the captives with narrowed eyes. "Who are you people?"

"Just vacationing tourists," Slate said disarmingly. "My name is Mark Slate and this is Miss April Dancer. We didn't realize this building was off-limits."

"Why were you spying on me?"

"Who's spying?" Slate inquired.

"We don't even know who you are. We were just looking around."

"You had to stand on a box and peek through a ventilator grill to do it?" the skull-faced man asked.

"We're the nosy type," Slate told him.

Moreno said, "Keep them covered," and stepped behind Slate.

Removing the camera slung from Slate's shoulder, Moreno handed it to the skull-faced man. Then he ran his hands over Slate's body in an expert frisk. His face tightened when he glanced at the gun he found in a belt holster.

"Only one organization uses guns such as this," he said in his

rumbling voice. “They are U.N.C.L.E. agents!”

Consuelo Cortez emitted a little gasp. The magnified eyes of the skull-faced man glared from behind their thick glasses. Only Pedro failed to change expression. His eyes were already as flat and cold as they could get.

April said to Slate, “You could have left that at home. I didn’t bring anything to identify me.”

“Quiet!” Moreno snapped at her.

He lifted the straw bag from April’s raised hand, opened it and examined the contents. Finding nothing in it which looked like a weapon, he tossed it to Consuelo.

April had hoped that her comment about having nothing with her to identify her as an U.N.C.L.E. agent would cause Moreno to examine her bag contents only cursorily. Actually it was loaded with weapons and tools, but they were all disguised as items normally found in any woman’s purse.

In addition to her communicator fountain pen, there was a lipstick armed with a hypodermic syringe which could inject either knockout drops or truth serum, a cigarette lighter which doubled as a cutting torch, a rattail comb made of surgical steel with a tail which served as a stiletto, a compact which converted its mirror to a transistorized TV screen when the proper button was pressed, a perfume atomizer which dispensed tear gas, a package of chewing gum which could be activated by saliva into a plastique explosive, and a package of mints which could convert a glass of water into a smoke pot. There was also the transistorized bug-detector earplug, but it was too small for Moreno to notice. He had been looking primarily for weapons.

“Search her,” Moreno ordered Consuelo.

The woman slipped the strap of the straw bag over one shoulder in order to leave her hands free and stepped behind April. Carefully she ran her hands over the girl agent’s body.

There were still three devices on April’s person, but Consuelo failed to detect any of them. This wasn’t surprising, since their true purpose was also disguised. April’s diamond earrings were really, glass cutters capable of cutting through safety glass. One of her hairpins was of spring steel, one prong being a thin cutting edge, the other a lockpick. From her charm bracelet hung a variety of bugging devices.

“She is unarmed,” Consuela said, stepping back.

“You two may put your hands down,” Moreno said. “Follow me.” He turned to Pedro and said sharply, “Keep them covered. U.N.C.L.E. agents are tricky.”

April and Slate lowered their arms. Moreno started up the hall with Consuela at his side. Pedro gestured with his gun for the two captives to follow and fell in behind them.

The man with the skull-like face trailed along at the end of the column.

FIVE

THE TRAP

Sancho Moreno led the way to a room beyond the one where the mentally retarded writers slaved at turning out singing commercials. Inside Slate and April discovered it was a small, windowless TV viewing room. Several rows of straight chairs were lined up before a television screen.

April and Slate were forced to sit in the two center chairs of the front row, April to Slate's right, and were bound tightly to the chairs. First their wrists were tied together in front of them, then their ankles were tied. Their ankles were lashed to the lower rungs of the chairs and ropes were run around their bodies and tightly knotted behind the chair backs, so that they couldn't even move.

Sancho Moreno tied Slate, while the skull-faced man tended to April. Moreno rechecked April's knots, however, apparently trusting no one's efficiency but his own. Satisfied that both were completely immobilized, he grinned down at them savagely.

"Do you two have any idea of what is in store for you?" he inquired with relish.

Neither deigned to reply.

"This is a soundproof room," Moreno said. "I am going to give you a treat. I am going to let you watch television."

Slate and April merely looked at him expressionlessly and said nothing.

"Lots and lots of television," Moreno said. "For eight hours, maybe more. Maybe twelve, perhaps even twenty-four. But I suspect eight will be enough. By then you should both be quite mad."

Mark Slate hiked his eyebrows.

"TV may be a vast wasteland, but I never heard of it driving anyone mad."

"You haven't seen and heard this broadcast," Moreno said with a guttural chuckle. "Happy viewing, U.N.C.L.E. agents."

He shooed the others from the room, went over to the television set and adjusted a couple of dials. April noted that it contained a number of dials not normally found on television sets.

When he had made the adjustments he wanted, Moreno switched on the set, walked out and closed the door behind him. They heard a key turn in the lock.

It took a few moments for the television set to warm up. When it

did, Consuelo Cortez's seductive figure appeared on the screen.

"Munch, munch, munch–crunch, crunch, crunch," the woman sang in her husky, hypnotic voice. "Eat 'em singly or by the bunch."

The sound was turned to nearly earsplitting volume. April had to shout to make herself heard above it.

"Don't look at it!" she yelled. "Close your eyes!"

She turned her head sidewise long enough to make sure Slate had heard her. When she saw his eyes squeezed tightly shut, she closed her own.

The woman only sang it three times, April thought. They ought to be able to bear that, even at the deafening volume. She wondered what was in store for them after the commercial was over.

She found out when the jingle ended for the third time. In the momentary silence which followed, April sighed with relief and opened her eyes. Consuelo's black-clad figure was just forming on the screen again.

"Munch, munch, munch," the hypnotic voice rolled from the speaker. "Crunch, crunch, crunch. Eat 'em singly or by the bunch."

Mark Slate was staring at the screen in horror.

"Good God!" he shouted above the singing commercial. "We're going to have to listen to that over and over for eight hours!"

They would both be driven mad, April thought with despair. Stark, raving mad.

Then she had an idea born of desperation.

"Sing!" she yelled at Slate. "If we close our eyes and sing at the tops of our voices, maybe we can drown it out."

He looked at her. "Sing what?" he yelled back.

"*On the Road to Mandalay*!" she shouted. "That's a good loud one."

Slate closed his eyes and boomed out in his rich baritone:

"On the road to Mandalay, where the flying fishes play–"

Squeezing her own eyes shut, April joined in with her contralto:

"And the sun comes up like thunder out of China 'cross the bay!"

It was working. The singing commercial made a discordant noise in the background, but April was able to make out neither the words nor the melody. When they reached the end of the ballad, they started over.

The trouble was that they weren't on tape, like the singing commercial. Halfway through the third rendition, April began to realize her vocal chords were becoming tired. She made it through three more renditions before it gave out completely.

Her voice came out in a squeak on the sixth: "–Take me back to Mandalay–"

She gave up, and a moment later Slate's voice failed too.

"Dip 'em, then lip 'em and gobble 'em down," the speaker blared.

"Lito's Fritos are the best in town."

April opened her eyes to stare hopelessly at Slate, and found him gazing at her with equal desperation.

"What now?" he shouted in a cracked voice.

April thought furiously and suddenly had another idea. She experimented by pressing her feet to the floor and giving a little lurch to the right. She was gratified to feel the chair legs move slightly. She did it again and felt them move another inch.

It took her a full fifteen minutes to maneuver the chair around until it was facing Slate's from about two feet away. All the time the blaring singing commercial kept tearing at her brain.

Mark Slate had been watching her without understanding. But when she began to rock her chair forward and backward, an expression of enlightenment grew on his face.

The chair rocked a little farther backward on its hind legs each time April pressed her feet to the floor and shoved downward. It swung a little farther forward on its front legs each time she released the pressure and flung her body forward. Finally she reached the point where, for a heart-stopping moment, she was afraid the chair was going to topple over backward. But after precariously balancing on its hind legs, it tipped forward again and the front legs hit the floor.

She strained forward, the chair tilted onto its front legs, balanced for what seemed an interminable period, then slowly tipped over forward. April fell to her knees with her head in Slate's lap.

"It's just above the right ear!" she shouted over the din of Consuelo's jingle.

One of Mark Slate's bound hands felt for and located the spring steel hairpin. A moment later he had sliced through his wrist bonds and had cut the rope binding the upper part of his body to the chair back. He took April Dancer by the shoulders and gently righted her chair before cutting his leg bonds.

Then he ran over and turned off the TV set.

"*Whew*!" he said, pressing the heels of his palms against his ears.

"Unscramble your brains on your time," April said. "Cut me loose."

Slate cut her loose. April stood up and rubbed the circulation back into her arms and legs. Then she looked into his face searchingly.

"That commercial didn't get to you, did it?" she asked. "You're not going to start going around in a daze again, are you?"

"I didn't watch her," Slate said.

"I don't think her hypnotism works unless you watch her."

He handed her back her hairpin. Before tucking it back into her hair, April went over and tried the door. As she had suspected, it was locked.

Kneeling, she used the picklock side of the hairpin on the lock. It

opened on the first try. Cautiously she cracked the door open about an inch.

When she saw no one in the hall, she rose to her feet, stuck the hairpin back into her hair and pulled the door the rest of the way open.

Immediately across the hall was the open door to a small office. No one was in it, but April spotted her straw bag lying on the desk.

It must be Consuela's office, she thought. Quickly she crossed to recover the bag, then rejoined Slate in the hallway.

"Now if I could only get back my U.N.C.L.E. gun," Slate said.

"Moreno handed it to the man with the thick glasses. Maybe it's in his office."

Slate glanced that way, then in the other direction. The building exit at the opposite end of the hall from the way they had entered was only a few yards away, whereas they would have to traverse nearly the full length of the hall to the skull-faced man's office.

"We'd better not press our luck," Slate said. "Let's get out of here."

They moved toward the exit from the building. Just before it was a closed door over which a lighted red sign said: RECORDING. DO NOT OPEN DOOR.

Pausing, April whispered, "Do you believe in signs?"

With a resigned shrug Mark Slate moved over to the door, turned the knob and cracked it open an inch. Putting an eye to the crack, he saw nothing but a blank sheet of black no more than three feet in front of him. After a moment he realized it was a screen before the door to block light from the hallway in case anyone opened the door despite the warning sign.

Motioning to April, he opened the door far enough to slip inside. A moment later April joined him and let the door ease closed behind her.

The screen, which consisted of a piece of plywood painted black, was about six feet wide and went clear to the ceiling. They could hear a murmur of voices in the room beyond it.

Slate peered around the right edge of the screen, April thrust her head around the left side. She immediately jerked it back when she saw Consuelo Cortez standing at the far side of the room directly facing her.

Then she realized that with the bright floodlights shining in Consuela's eyes, the woman couldn't possibly see back to the dimness at this end of the room. Cautiously she peeked around the edge of the screen again.

Consuelo was dressed in the same black, low-cut gown she had worn in the Lito's Fritos commercial.

She stood on a small, glaringly lighted stage before a white

backdrop.

Between the stage and April, with their backs to April and Slate, there was a full camera and recording crew. A camera man sat on the high seat of his camera, another man was manipulating a microphone boom to place it in the exact position he wanted it above Consuelo's head. Sound and lighting engineers were adjusting their equipment. Off to one side, with a microphone before him, a man sat next to a record player.

The heavy-shouldered Sancho Moreno sat in a canvas-backed chair on whose back was lettered: *Director.*

"That went pretty easy," Moreno said. "You feel up to doing the other one, Consuela?"

The woman shrugged her shapely shoulders. "We might as well get it over with."

"Okay," Moreno called. "We're going to shoot the last one. Put in your earplugs."

The cameraman stuffed plugs into his ears. "All set," he called.

"Now the rest of you don't look at her," Moreno cautioned. "Lights and sound ready?"

The sound engineer and the lighting engineer indicated they were set.

Moreno pointed to the man before the record player. "Music!"

The man flicked a switch. "Action, camera!"

Consuelo Cortez's expressionless face formed an intimate, seductive smile. As the record player began to emit a jarring but compelling tune, she began to sing.

To April the jingle was even more revolting than the one about Lito's Fritos, yet at the same time it was more hypnotic.

Everybody's chewin' one, chewin' one, chewin' one;
Everybody's chewin' an Upsa-Daisy.
From tiny tots to grownups
They gulp' em down like crazy.

As with the previous commercial, Consuelo sang it three times, the volume of her voice rising and the insistence of her tone increasing each time. Halfway through the second verse April pulled in her head and covered her ears with her palms.

After a time she tested by taking her palms from her ears. There was blessed silence. Then she heard Sancho Moreno say, "Print it."

She turned toward Mark Slate.

He still had his head poked around the corner. She lightly touched his shoulder, when he failed to respond, poked it harder.

Pulling back his head with a start, he looked around at her. She gestured toward the door. Nodding, he cracked it open and set his eye to the crack for a moment. Then he pushed it wider and stepped into

the hall. April Dancer followed.

The skull-faced man must have been heading for the recording studio, walking case to the wall. Slate hadn't spotted him when he peered out, because the door opened outward and the hinges were on that side.

The open door blocked April and Slate's view of him until April had pushed it closed behind her.

Slate and the skull-faced man simultaneously recovered from their surprise. As the man's hand shot beneath his coat, Slate reached out, grabbed the lapel of his coat and jerked him off balance. Mark Slate's right foot connected with his knee, the man's feet shot out from under him and he landed heavily on hands and knees. The edge of Slate's palm slashed down on the back of his neck and he collapsed on his face.

Slate stooped, felt at the man's waist and straightened with his U.N.C.L.E. gun in his hand and a pleased expression on his face.

"Want to check his office for the camera?" April whispered.

Slate whispered back, "As I mentioned before, let's not press our luck."

Putting away the gun, he headed for the exit they had originally been making for when sidetracked by the recording studio sign. April hurried after him.

When they let themselves out and eased the door shut behind them, only one person was in sight. Pedro Martinez, their tour guide, was just entering the building housing the broadcasting studio. His back was to them and he didn't glance around.

"We'll probably have to fight our way past the gate guard," Slate said.

"Why bother?" April asked, pointing to the ten-foot-high steel mesh fence no more than twenty feet away.

Slate examined her dubiously.

"I could shinny over it, but do you think you could make it in a skirt without splitting something?"

"We'll go through it," she said.

She took a piece of gum from her bag and popped it into her mouth.

Slate gave her a delighted smile.

"That's what I like about you, April. You're a girl of direct action. You believe the shortest distance between two points is a straight line."

"Why be subtle?" she asked.

"Eventually they'll discover we're gone anyway. Why should we care if we leave our escape route well marked?"

She took a rubber band from her purse and fitted it over two

fingers. Taking the wad of gum from her mouth, she worked it into a tight ball, fitted it into the rubber band and drew it back between her veed fingers. Carefully aiming, she let fly at a point on the ground only inches in front of the fence.

There was a puff of smoke and a muffled explosion. When the smoke cleared, there was a gaping hole in the fence three feet high and three feet across.

April ran to the hole and crawled through first. Slate was right behind her. They had darted across the street and had run to the busy intersection of the main street fronting the studio grounds before there was any reaction from the studio area.

Standing on the corner amid twin streams of passing pedestrians, they looked back. One or two pedestrians had paused and were looking that way too, but for the most part people on the street paid no attention to the explosion. Like New Yorkers, they probably didn't want to be involved, April thought.

About a dozen people inside the fence were staring at the hole in it. Among them April recognized Sancho Moreno, Consuela Cortez and Pedro Martinez.

Mark Slate flagged a passing taxi over to the curb. As he held the door open for her, April glanced back again. Sancho Moreno had spotted them and was glaring their way.

April waved to him and stepped into the cab.

En route back to the hotel April said, "What do you suppose an Upsa-Daisy is?"

"Candy bar, I imagine," Slate said. "You chew 'em, and it can't be tobacco or gum, because you also gulp 'em down."

April made a face. "I'll add 'em to my list of products I never intend to buy. Lito's Fritos and Upsa-Daisies."

They rode in silence for some blocks. Presently April said, "Shouldn't we report to Mr. Waverly, Mark?"

When there was no answer, she glanced at him. He was gazing abstractedly at the back of the driver's neck.

"Mark!" she said.

Slate blinked and turned his head. "Yes?"

"You let her get to you again!" she accused. "Didn't you have sense enough not to watch and listen?"

After a momentary expression of startlement, he turned on a rueful smile. "That blasted jingle was going through my mind," he admitted. "But I don't think it has me hooked. I only had one exposure, and it took a full week of watching the other one several times a night to get to me."

"You were off in space just now."

"The thing is still fresh in my mind. I'll clamp down a mental lid

every time I start to think of it from now on. I'm sure I don't need another brainwash."

After studying him, she nodded.

"I'll take your word for it. But if you continue staring off into space periodically, we're going to catch a plane for New York."

The cab pulled up in front of the Hotel La Paz.

They got out and Slate paid the driver.

On the way up in the elevator, Mark Slate suddenly gave his head a violent shake. April looked at him inquiringly.

"It tried to slip into my mind again," he said ruefully. "I clamped down the lid before the first line could fully form. See, I'm able to control it."

"I hope so," she said without much assurance.

Slate's room was nearest to the elevator. They both entered it. April Dancer took the earplug from her bag and slipped it into her ear. After listening for a moment, she removed it and dropped it back into her purse.

"You're a suspicious young lady," Slate said.

"Our names are in that registration book," she reminded him. "Also our local address. They could have sent someone over to bug our rooms."

"Except that they wouldn't have bothered," he pointed out with masculine logic. "They had us in custody and never meant to release us alive, or at least not until we were raving mad.

"Why would they bug a couple of rooms they never expected us to return to?"

She made a face at him. Taking her pen-communicator from her bag, she called Section II at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

When Mr. Waverly's voice said, "Yes, Miss Dancer?" she reported at length about their visit to the studio grounds and what they had learned there.

When she finished, Waverly said, "You think all three jingles are already taped, eh?"

"From what Moreno said, it sounded as though they had just finished taping the second one before we sneaked into the recording studio. We didn't actually see or hear it, though." After a pause, she added, "Thank goodness for that little thing."

"I see your point," Waverly said. "Is the one you heard as horrible as the Lito's Fritos jingle?"

"Worse."

"Is that possible?" Waverly asked with mild surprise. "You don't believe they are planning to tape any more in the near future, though?"

"Their writers haven't been able to come up with any more jingles

satisfactory to Sancho Moreno, sir. He indicated that it might be weeks before they do."

"Then here are your orders, Miss Dancer. Before they have a chance to ship the completed tapes to *Wescott and Coombs*, you and Mr. Slate must get hold of all copies and destroy them."

"Yes, sir. But won't they just remake them?"

"Delaying tactics, Miss Dancer.

Eventually we will have to come up with a plan to end the operation permanently. Meantime it is imperative to prevent the tapes already completed from appearing on American television."

"Yes, sir," April said, a little dubiously.

"You sound as though you do not approve, Miss Dancer."

"Well, it seems like a stopgap measure which is going to leave us with the same problem."

"It is a stopgap measure, Miss Dancer," Waverly said patiently. "Nothing more is possible at this point. We can hardly bring the Lombodia police into it. There is nothing illegal about making singing commercials, although perhaps there should be. We must have time to plan effective counter measures."

"All right, sir," April said.

"Mark and I will raid the studio tonight and attempt to destroy the tapes."

She broke the connection, replaced the pen in her purse and looked at Mark Slate.

"Were you paying attention?" she asked.

"I'm not hooked on that jingle," he said a trifle testily. "I haven't even started to think of it since it tried to drift into my mind on the elevator."

"Bravo," she said. "Ten whole minutes."

"Don't be a nag," he said. He glanced at his watch. "It's cocktail time. It'll be hours before it's dark enough to hit the studio, so we may as well relax."

"Are you buying?" April asked cautiously.

"Did you ever?" he countered. She said sweetly. "I accept your kind offer. I'll be ready in ten minutes."

She left the room and went next door to her own room.

SIX

PLACE OF NO RETURN

At this time of year it did not get completely dark until nine. April Dancer and Slate had a taxi drop them a block from the studio grounds at nine-thirty.

Slate was dressed the same way as he had been that afternoon, except for the camera, but April had changed from her native garb. Tonight she wore a tight, plain black dress and spike heels.

There was no moon, but the sky was clear and starlit. The street fronting the studio grounds was also brightly lit by street lamps. The grounds themselves were dark, however, and there were no lights in any of the buildings.

As this was primarily a commercial section, the streets were deserted at this time of night. April and Slate paused in front of the closed main gate and peered in. No one was in sight.

The gate was padlocked. Taking the spring steel hairpin from her hair, April reached for the lock. To her surprise she found that it hadn't been snapped shut.

"It's already open," she said. She tucked the pin back into her hair.

Slate frowned. He made no move to lift the padlock from its hasp and push open the gate. Instead he carefully studied the dark buildings inside the enclosure.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" April asked.

"Uh-huh. I suspect we had better look this gift horse in the mouth. If you were Moreno, wouldn't you expect us to come back again?"

"Of course. I would make it easy to get in, and have a reception committee waiting."

"Let's find a harder route in," Slate suggested.

"It might be safer," April agreed.

They walked back the way they had come. When they reached the corner where the taxi had dropped them, they turned right for a block, then right again. They came out at the rear of the fenced area.

The street running along the rear of the studio grounds was a secondary one and was much less brightly lighted than the main street fronting the area. They found the rear gate tightly padlocked.

April's spring steel hairpin easily opened the lock. Slate paused in the act of pushing open the gate.

"I just had a thought," he said.

"What?"

"THR USH people tend to be pretty devious. Moreno should have known we would smell fish when we found the main gate unlocked. Maybe he figured it would drive us around to this rear gate."

April peered through the wire mesh at the dark buildings. "I don't see anyone lurking in ambush."

"That doesn't necessarily mean they aren't there. I'm going in alone."

She frowned at him. "Why?"

"So only one of us will be caught if a trap has been set. You'll be free to try to get me out of it."

April could see the logic of that, but she hated to take a back seat. "All right. But why don't I go in while you wait out here?"

"Because I'm bigger than you are, and bigger people get their ways."

"Bully!" she said.

He threw her a smile, slipped through the gate and eased it shut behind him. April watched him move soundlessly toward the building where they had spied on Consuela making the singing commercial. He disappeared into its shadow.

As Mark Slate crouched next to the building, he considered the best way to escape the trap he was almost sure had been laid. So far there was no sign of one, but the unlocked front gate had been too glaringly obvious. Besides, he possessed a sort of sixth sense about danger, and alarms were clanging furiously in his brain.

If a trap had been laid, they would most likely expect him to force entry by one of the two doors into the building, he decided. Therefore it would be wise to choose a more difficult means of entry.

The most probable storage place for the tapes he was supposed to destroy was the recording room where they had been made. At least that seemed to Slate the most logical place to begin his search. He might by-pass the trap, if there was one set, and at the same time gain direct access to the tapes by slipping through the window of the recording studio.

That room was the corner one on the opposite side of the building. Silently he moved past the door by which he and April had exited from the building that afternoon. He rounded the corner and examined the window into the recording studio.

A grill consisting of narrow steel vertical bars guarded the window. The bars weren't set into the sill and the upper part of the window frame, however. There were two quarter-inch-thick bands of steel running horizontally from one side of the window frame to the other, one a couple of inches from the top of the window, the other a couple of inches above the sill. The bars were welded to these at each end.

Slate was pleased on two counts.

It hardly seemed likely that anyone inside would expect entry through a barred window, and by cutting the steel bands in only four places, it would be possible to lift the whole grill from the window.

Taking a small bottle from his coat pocket, Mark Slate leaped up to grasp the top band with his free hand and pulled himself up until his feet rested on the sill. Carefully he pulled the bottle's cork with his teeth. Hanging onto the upper steel band with one hand, he tipped the bottle and allowed a few drops of its contents to spill onto the top of the steel band between the farthest right bar and the window frame.

There was a hissing sound, a momentary dull glow and a small cloud of vapor. Molten metal dripped downward and a narrow slit appeared in the band.

Shifting position, he poured a few drops on top of the band near the left side of the frame, then immediately dropped to the ground.

When the hissing had subsided for the second time, he treated the lower crosspiece in the same way on both sides, then quickly re-corked the bottle and dropped it back into his pocket. He was grasping bars with both hands to prevent the grill from falling before the fluid ate all the way through the metal. Gently he lowered the grill to the ground.

With the grill guarding the window, apparently it had been considered unnecessary to lock it. He found it unlatched. Pushing the lower part upward, he crawled through onto the small stage where Consuelo Cortez had stood while singing the Ups a-Daisy commercial. He found himself behind the white backdrop before which the female hypnotist had stood.

He was pleased that it was still in place. It would prevent the glow of his flashlight from being seen through the window if anyone happened to glance this way.

Rounding the backdrop, he flicked on a pencil flashlight. The camera, lights, sound recorder and record player were all in the same position they had been during the recording session. The thin beam roved around the room. It touched a long table shoved against the right wall, moved on to play over the black plywood screen in front of the door, then to the left and settled on a tier of filing cabinets along that wall.

Crossing to the cabinets, he flashed the light on the small white card centering the top drawer of the first file cabinet. It read: *Correspondence*. He moved the light downward over cards which read*: Contracts, Personnel File* and *Scripts*.

He moved to the second cabinet. The top drawer contained films of old movies. The other three contained the tapes of old American series shows.

He went on to the third cabinet and found what he was looking for in the top drawer.

It was labeled: *Singing Commercial Tapes*.

He was pulling open the drawer when the room lights suddenly went on behind him.

Slate spun, reaching for his U.N.C.L.E. gun, then froze. The cold-eyed Pedro Martinez stood next to the plywood screen blocking the doorway, his thirty-eight automatic leveled.

As Slate slowly elevated his hands, Martinez said with frigid amusement, "We expected you, Senor Slate. I have been standing behind this screen ever since it grew dark. Had you come in by either door or any of the other windows, you would have found someone waiting also."

Slate shrugged. "Why did you wait so long to announce yourself?"

"It amused me to let you almost find what you were looking for. Forgive my little joke."

"Of course," Slate said. "I like a good laugh myself."

"Turn around, please."

Slate turned his back, hands still elevated. He heard footsteps approach behind him.

Then the hard edge of a palm caught him behind the ear and he tumbled forward into darkness.

When Slate awakened, he found himself spread-eagled on a long table, his wrists and ankles each bound separately, with the ropes running over the edges of the table to be fastened to the four legs. His head was throbbing dully.

When he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was his own bare chest, and he realized he was stripped to the waist. The next thing he became conscious of was a television camera a few feet to his left.

Glancing around, he saw that he was still in the recording studio, The table he was on was the long one he had noticed pushed against the right wall. It had been pulled out into the center of the room, presumably to make it easier to work around all four sides of it when he was being spread-eagled on top of it.

He grew conscious of someone standing just behind him. Twisting his neck, he looked up into the predatory eyes of Consuela Cortez. A couple of people were beyond her in a corner, conversing in low tones, but Slate could just barely get an impression of them from the edge of his vision and was unable to make out who they were.

"He's awake," Consuela said in her husky voice.

The two people in the corner came over to stand either side of the table and look down at him. The one to his right was the skull-faced Barth. The other was Sancho Moreno.

"Welcome back, Mr. Slate," the wide-shouldered Moreno rumbled.

“You have had a nice little nap.”

“Evening, Sancho,” Slate said politely. “Excuse my rudeness for dropping off in the middle of the party.”

The big man’s heavy features formed into a humorless smile. “Your poise exceeds your intelligence, Mr. Slate. Were you so foolish as to think we wouldn’t expect another visit?”

“The thought occurred to me,” Slate admitted. “I had to chance it anyway. Orders from above, you know.”

Moreno snorted. “You are English, aren’t you?”

“That’s right, old boy.”

“You stupid Britons. If you’re ordered to march into cannon fire, you blindly go ahead, even though you know it’s suicide.”

“Stiff upper lip and all that, you know,” Slate said lightly.

There was the sound of a door opening and closing again, then Pedro Martinez appeared from behind the plywood screen in front of the door.

“No sign of her,” he said. “I scoured the whole area.”

He must be talking of April, Slate thought. Which meant that they hadn’t captured her. He felt a ray of hope. So long as April was still free he knew she would bend every effort to get him out of this.

He was glad he had insisted on going in alone.

Sancho Moreno drew his thick brows together in a frown. Looking down at the bound man, he said, “Where is Miss Dancer, Slate?’

“What time is it?” Slate countered.

“About a quarter after ten. You were out for some time.”

Slate pretended to do some mental calculations. “I would say she’s about over Macon, Georgia right now. She caught the six o’clock plane for Miami and changed there for a jet flight to New York.”

“You lie poorly,” Moreno said with a snort of disgust. “One of our agents saw the two of you catch a taxi together in front of the Hotel La Paz at nine.”

“That wasn’t April,” Slate said quickly. “Had your agent ever seen Miss Dancer before?”

“No,” Moreno admitted. “But he had descriptions of both of you.”

“You’d better train him to memorize descriptions better,” Slate said. “That chick was a redhead I picked up in the hotel bar. I dropped her at a tavern en route here and planned to meet her there when I finished my business.”

Moreno examined him suspiciously. “What tavern?”

Slate shook his head. “I’m not getting her involved in this. She’s just an innocent bystander.”

“She won’t be harmed. Give us her name and the name of the tavern, and we’ll merely phone to verify that she’s there.”

"No sale," Slate said definitely. Moreno glanced across the table at the skull-faced man. "What do you think, Barth?"

The man's thick-lensed glasses glinted. "He's lying. It was the Dancer girl who got in the taxi with him."

Moreno gave a grim nod of agreement. Turning to Pedro Martinez, he said, "Check the whole area again, and do a better job this time. She has to be out there somewhere."

"Yes, sir," Pedro said.

Moreno said to the woman, "See what you can do, Consuela."

The female hypnotist moved to the foot of the table. Her face assumed the same intimate, seductive smile she employed on television.

"Let's become acquainted, Mr. Slate," she said in her husky voice. "My name is Consuela Cortez."

"I know."

"You may call me Consuela. May I call you Mark?"

"Please do. I hate formality."

"Would you like to get to know me real well, Mark?"

Her voice had lowered and had taken on a sing-song quality. Gazing into her eyes, Slate discovered that suddenly they were no longer predatory, but had become soft and sympathetic.

A faint drowsiness began to assail him.

All at once he realized he was being hypnotized. Squeezing shut his eyes, he began to whistle. The drowsiness instantly fled.

"What's he doing?" Moreno demanded.

Barth's voice said, "Whistling the *Road to Mandalay*. Are you making him do that, Consuela?"

"I'm not making him do anything," the woman said. "He isn't under."

Barth said, "Stop that infernal racket, sir!"

Slate stopped whistling and opened his eyes. Carefully he refrained from looking at Consuela, gazing up at Barth's thick glasses instead.

"I've been informed by a psychiatrist that I have a very strong mind," he said. "Consuelo is wasting her time trying to hypnotize me, because I won't submit."

Moreno and Barth both glanced at Consuela. The woman shrugged.

"It is virtually impossible to hypnotize a subject who resists," she said. "If I had caught him unaware, I could have done it. Now it is too late, because he knows."

"Bah!" Moreno said in disgust.

"Under hypnosis he could have told us where Miss Dancer is."

"How about torture?" Barth suggested.

Moreno gave his large head an impatient shake. "I have worked on U.N.C.L.E. agents before. Nothing makes them talk. They are pre-

conditioned to die before disclosing a single U.N.C.L.E. secret."

"Then what do we do?"

"Dispose of him," Moreno said unemotionally. "He is of no further use to us. We will deal with Miss Dancer when we catch up with her."

"You can't kill him here?" Consuela objected. "How will you dispose of the body?"

"I have no intention of killing him here,'" Moreno said testily. "Please credit me with some sense. We will take him to my castle and take care of the body disposal problem by the same means that will kill him."

"How is that?" Consuela asked. "We will feed him to my pets." The woman shivered, but her expression failed to indicate squeamishness. It was one of pleased anticipation which belied the shiver.

"He will be easier to transport unconscious," Moreno said to Barth. "Put him out."

The skull-faced man removed a heavy ring from his finger, twisted the stone and a thin needle popped out. He pressed the needle into Slate's right forearm.

The faces surrounding Slate immediately began to blur. Within moments he was unconscious.

When a half hour had passed, without Mark Slate returning, April decided to investigate. Slipping through the gate, she made for the building into whose shadows he had disappeared.

When she reached the nearest side of the building, she decided that as a first move she would see if she could glimpse anything through the windows. They were all dark on this side, but she moved down the line attempting to see inside through them. She noted that all the windows were barred, and nothing greeted her gaze but darkness.

She rounded the front of the building, slipped past the door and peered around the corner on the other side. At the far end a dim glow of light showed from the last window.

Tiptoeing to the window, she peeked cautiously in. She was confronted by nothing but a white curtain no more than two feet in front of her. Then she realized she was looking into the recording studio where Consuelo Cortez had made the Upsa-Daisy commercial, and the curtain was the white backdrop before which the woman had stood.

The window was wide open from the bottom. The grill which had guarded it lay on the ground and the stumps of the iron bands which had held it in place stuck out from the window frame about an inch on each side.

Obviously this was Mark Slate's handiwork, and he was inside

searching for the tapes. She was on the verge of announcing her presence to him with a low whistle when she heard the rumbling voice of Sancho Moreno.

"That will hold him," the voice said. "Now we can tend to Miss Dancer. Pedro, search the grounds."

"Yes, sir," the voice of the tour guide said.

April heard a door open and close. She glanced around for a place to hide. There were no trees or shrubbery in the entire area, nor anything else to hide behind except the other buildings. A game of hide-and-seek around the buildings was certain to end with her as the loser.

She heard the door at the end of the building open and close. She knew she had to get out of sight immediately.

She slipped the strap of her purse over her wrist to leave her hands free. The window sill came about even with her chest. Gripping it with both hands, she pulled herself upward, twisted in the air and landed in a seated position on the sill, back to the room.

Bringing her knees to her chest, she swiveled around and dropped her feet to the floor inside without sound. Rising, she moved to one side of the window behind the white curtain.

She was none too soon, for a moment later she heard Pedro's footsteps go past the window.

From the other side of the curtain she heard the low rumble of Sancho Moreno's voice and an occasional interjection by a voice she recognized as that of the skull-faced Barth.

Both men were speaking too low for her to make out the words, however.

The white curtain was of heavy velvet, far too thick for her shadow to be seen through it. She decided peeking around the edge would be dangerous, as she had no way of knowing if anyone in the room happened to be looking this way. She looked the curtain over carefully in an attempt to find a hole she could peek through, but there were none.

Removing the spring-steel hairpin from her hair, she thrust the pointed end of the cutting edge through the curtain at eye level and cut out a tiny circle no more than an eighth of an inch in diameter. Sticking the hairpin back in her hair, she put her eye to the hole.

Mark Slate, stripped to the waist, lay spread-eagled on a long table, his wrists and ankles tied to the corners. His eyes were closed and he seemed to be unconscious. His coat, vest, shirt, undershirt and tie were draped over the back of a chair near the record player. Lying on the seat of the chair was his U.N.C.L.E. gun.

The voluptuous Consuela Cortez stood just behind Slate, gazing down at him expressionlessly. Sancho Moreno and the cadaverous

Bart conversed in the far corner.

Slate stirred and opened his eyes. Consuelo announced, “He’s awake.”

When Sancho Moreno began to question Slate, April felt pride at the way he parried the questions.

Pedro returned to report his unsuccessful search of the area, and was sent back to double-check.

When Consuela Cortez rounded the table to stand at Slate’s feet and began to talk to him, April recognized at once that she was attempting hypnosis. She breathed a sigh of relief when Slate realized in time what was going on and foiled the attempt.

Then her relief turned to horror as the trio calmly discussed their plans to murder and dispose of Slate’s body.

A few moments after Slate lapsed into unconsciousness from the drug injection given him by Barth, Pedro Martinez returned for the second time.

“She just isn’t out there,” he reported to Moreno. “I checked the doors and windows to every building and none have been broken into. There is nowhere else she could hide.”

“Probably she has gone for reinforcements,” Barth Suggested. “We had better get this man Slate out of here.”

“Bring around the panel truck,” Moreno ordered Pedro.

Barth said, “Are we going to go off and leave those tapes unguarded? If the girl from U.N.C.L.E. comes back with other agents, they will tear the place apart looking for them.”

Sancho Moreno’s beetling brows drew together thoughtfully. “You’re right. Wait a minute, Pedro. Send Dingo in here before you go after the truck.”

Pedro, en route to the door, paused, said, “Yes, sir,” and continued on out.

A few moments later the gross, hairy man who ruled over the mentally-retarded jingle writers entered the room. Apparently the riding whip was a constant accessory, because he was carrying it with him.

He looked at Mark Slate curiously, but asked no questions. He merely said to Moreno, “You wanted me, boss?”

“I have a job for you, Dingo,” Moreno said.

Going over to the bank of filing cabinets on the left side of the room, Moreno opened a drawer and removed three flat, round tins.

Handing them to the hairy Dingo, he said, “I want you to guard these with your life. Stick them under your mattress and don’t leave your room until I return. Understand?”

“Sure, boss.”

“You don’t have a gun, do you?” Dingo flicked his whip. “This is

all the weapon I need."

"It won't be much defense against a gun," Moreno growled. "Here, use this."

He went over to the chair where Mark Slate's clothing was piled and picked up the U.N.C.L.E. gun. Dingo slouched over to look at it.

"What kind of gun is that?" he asked puzzledly.

"A special one carried by U.N.C.L.E. agents. See this little lever on the side?"

The hairy man nodded.

"When it's in the up position, like now, it fires a dart which instantly renders the victim unconscious, but otherwise doesn't harm him. Depressed, it fires to kill. I want you to leave it the way it's set."

Dingo hiked his eyebrows.

"There's a girl from U.N.C.L.E. who may come nosing around," Moreno explained. "If she shows up in an attempt to get hold of those tapes, I want her taken alive. I want to question her."

Barth said, "I thought you said it was useless to question U.N.C.L.E. agents."

Moreno bared his strong teeth in a savage grin. "I have never worked on a female one. Maybe she would be more responsive…. "

Pedro returned and announced that he had backed the panel truck up to the building's entrance.

"Okay," Moreno said. "Untie our friend and we'll load him on the truck."

Pedro said, "Slate cut the bars out of the window into this room. It leaves a wide-open route for that girl to get in if she returns."

"There won't be anything in here for her to find," Moreno said, indicating the three tins Dingo was holding. "Dingo's going to sit on these until we get back. You had better close and latch the window, though."

Pedro headed for the white curtain concealing April.

SEVEN

THE HUNGRY ONES

April moved fast. Tiptoeing to the window, she seated herself on the sill, raised her feet and swiveled around. She dropped to the ground an instant before Pedro rounded the edge of the curtain.

There was no time even to scramble to one side of the window. She crouched on hands and knees right below it, pressed against the side of the building.

Above her she heard the window slide downward and the latch engage.

On hands and knees she crawled past the edge of the window, then rose to her feet. Moving to the rear of the building, she peeked around the corner and saw a gray panel truck backed up to the door.

Belatedly it occurred to her that she had no way to follow the truck when it pulled away. They should have rented a car instead of taking a taxi, she thought with despair.

Her only hope lay in finding a cruising taxi immediately, she realized. And that was probably a forlorn hope in this area at this time of night.

Only twenty feet away from this side of the building was the section of steel-mesh fence through which she had blasted a hole that afternoon. She saw that the hole had been covered temporarily merely by leaning a piece of plywood about four feet square against it.

Quickly she crossed to the hole, pulled the plywood aside and crawled through. She had barely pulled the plywood back in place when the building's door opened.

Crouching behind the plywood, she peered around the edge. Consuelo was holding the door open as Pedro and Moreno carried the unconscious form of Mark Slate through it. The cadaverous Barth opened the rear doors of the panel truck and Slate was loaded inside.

Pedro and Barth climbed in back with him. Moreno slammed the doors, then rounded the truck to slip under the wheel. Consuela went around the other way and climbed in front next to him.

The engine started and the truck's lights went on. The truck swung in a U-turn to drive along the building on April's side toward the main gate. As the headlights momentarily bathed the piece of plywood, April drew in her head and crouched low.

Then the lights swung forward and the truck presented its red

taillights to April. Rising, she ran across the street and up to the same corner she and Slate had fled to that afternoon. Halfway there she saw the truck halt at the main gate, Moreno got out and opened it.

She had reached the corner by the time he had driven through, had halted again and had gotten out to close and lock the gate behind him.

The gate was only about fifty yards from the corner. The street was brightly lighted and if either Consuela or Moreno had glanced her way, they couldn't have failed to spot her. In her desperation she was unheeding of this danger.

The only thing on the corner which could offer even partial concealment was the concrete standard of a street lamp. She leaned against the side, opposite the truck, where it only partly concealed her, but at least made her less obvious. Frantically she glanced up and down the street in search of a cruising taxi.

There wasn't another vehicle or person in sight.

The truck started up again, turned left and picked up speed. April Dancer watched in frustration as the red taillights receded in the distance and finally disappeared.

There was still hope, she told herself. Sancho Moreno had mentioned that they were taking Slate to his castle. That could have been merely his way of referring to his house, but it could be that he actually lived in a castle. The Spanish conquistadors had built a number of castles in Central America, some of which had been reclaimed by rich Americans as homes. It was hardly likely that there would be more than one such castle near Vina Rosa, so it should be easy to locate.

She walked two blocks before she spotted the lights of a tavern. She was gratified to find a phone booth just inside the door. When she closed its door from inside, a fan went on above her.

There was no Sancho Moreno listed in the book. Probably the man had an unlisted number, she thought. She phoned for a taxi and the dispatcher told her one would be there in ten minutes.

She might as well report to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters while she was waiting, she decided. Taking out her pen-communicator, she raised the antenna, then lifted the phone from its hook and held it in the same hand, the phone concealing the pen, in case someone glanced into the booth and wondered what she was doing. She held the hook down with her other hand.

"Section Two, please," she said, After a moment Randy Kovac's voice said, "Hi, Miss Dancer."

"What are you doing there at this time of night?" April demanded.

"My homework. It's quieter here than at home."

"I'll bet," she said. "You just can't stay away from the place, can

you? Is Mr. Waverly in?"

"He's talking to Mr. Solo on another channel. Hang on."

A few moments passed before Alexander Waverly's schoolmaster voice said, "Yes, Miss Dancer?"

"Mark has just been taken, sir. They're driving to some place Sancho Moreno referred to as his castle and intend to feed him to some kind of pets Moreno keeps. I have no idea what the pets are."

Waverly, as usual, remained unruffled. "I take it you don't know where this castle is … "

"No, sir. I'm not even sure it's a castle. It may just be his way of referring to his house."

"Use your imagination, Miss Dancer. If it is a castle, there are hardly likely to be many in the area. Probably any native could tell you where it is. If it's just a house, he may be listed in the phone book."

"I thought of that, sir," April said a trifle resentfully. "I'm merely making a progress report while waiting for a taxi. Moreno isn't listed in the phone book, but a taxi driver may know where he lives. Even if he doesn't live in an actual castle, he's pretty prominent locally."

"I see. Then you plan some kind of rescue operation?"

"Of course."

"I wish you good luck. Aside from Mr. Slate's dire circumstances, how are things going?"

"I've learned where the three tapes are kept. As soon as I rescue Mark, we'll return and destroy them."

"Return?" Waverly said.

"You're near the location now?"

"I'm about two blocks from the studio."

In a testy voice Waverly said, "Those tapes have first priority, Miss Dancer. You may make your rescue attempt when that job is completed."

"You can't be serious, sir," April said indignantly. "Mark's life is in danger!"

Randy Kovac's voice broke in: "Mr. Slate's life is more important than those old tapes, sir. You can't just let him die."

There was a moment of silence; then Waverly said heavily, "This business tends to distort values. It's one of the dangers of any bureaucratic organization that executive minds more and more work like computers, evaluating situations in terms only of efficiency and forgetting human values. I spend too much time at my desk, no doubt. Of course Mr. Slate's safety has first priority. I leave the matter to your judgment, Miss Dancer."

"Thank you, sir," April said gratefully.

“Incidentally, some assistance is en route, Miss Dancer, but I doubt that it will arrive in time to help you with Mr. Slate. Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin have completed their mission in Nigeria and were en route home when I rerouted them to Lombodia. They will land at the Vina Rosa airport in about two hours. I just talked to Mr. Solo and informed him you and Mr. Slate were staying at the Hotel La Paz. You should be able to reach them there in about two and a half hours.”

“Fine,” April said. “We can use all the help we can get.”

Through the booth door she saw a uniformed taxi driver enter the tavern.

“My taxi just arrived, sir,” she said. “I’ll have to sign off.”

“Very well, Miss Dancer. Good luck.”

When Mark Slate awoke, he found himself lying on a huge, high-backed double bed of old-fashioned design. The cold-eyed Pedro Martinez was seated in a chair facing the bed a few feet away, his thirty-eight automatic balanced on his knee.

Except for a slight light-headedness, Slate felt no after-effect from the drug. He flexed his muscles and realized he was no longer bound hand and foot. He was still bare to the waist, however.

Glancing around, he saw that he was in a large, high-ceilinged bedroom with walls of stone and tall, narrow windows. He must be in the castle Moreno had referred to, he thought.

He spotted his coat, waistcoat, shirt, undershirt and tie lying on a chair near one of the windows.

Pedro said, “Decided to rejoin us, eh?” rose from his chair, went over to the wall and pulled a hanging bell cord.

After a few moments Sancho Moreno came into the room. He came over to the foot of the bed and smiled down at Slate.

“Ah, Mr. Slate. I hope you rested well.”

“Just fine,” Slate said politely.

“I’m embarrassed that I keep dropping off this way.”

“You needn’t apologize,” Moreno said dryly. “It’s quite understandable.”

“What time is it?” Slate asked.

“Only about eleven-thirty. You rested for about an hour. You may get up, if you wish.”

Slate swung his legs over the side of the bed and came to his feet. By now he felt quite normal.

Pedro’s automatic was covering him. Slate took a tentative step toward his clothing on the chair near the window, when no one objected, went over and began to put it on. Casually he felt in his coat pockets.

“If you are looking for the little vial of metal dissolving fluid, we

appropriated it," Moreno told him. "No doubt I will get a commendation from Central Headquarters when THRUSH research scientists have completed analyzing it."

With a shrug Slate resumed dressing. There was an enormous marble-topped dresser with a mirror reaching nearly to the ceiling against one wall. He used the mirror to knot his tie, tucked in his shirt-tails and donned his waistcoat and coat.

"A typical Englishman," Moreno said mockingly. "Now that you are properly attired, I suppose you feel capable of facing anything."

"It does help the old morale," Slate admitted.

"You will need it," Moreno told him. "Follow me, please."

He left the room and Pedro gestured with his gun for Slate to follow. In single file they went along a narrow hallway which had electric bulbs installed in ancient candelabra which were affixed to the walls at intervals.

At the end of the hall they went down broad stone steps into a huge, high-ceilinged banquet room. The room was about the size of a hotel lobby, and in addition to a long banquet table, was furnished with numerous sofas and chairs.

Consuela Cortez and the cadaverous Barth were seated side-by-side on a sofa. Coffee cups sat on a low table in front of the sofa, both cups empty.

The woman's predatory eyes examined Slate.

"Why did you let him dress?" she asked Moreno.

"He is an Englishman. A man must be allowed to die with dignity. For an Englishman to die without his cravat properly knotted is like a gunman of the old American west dying with his boots on."

"Sentimentalist," Consuelo sniffed.

Slate grunted. Sancho Moreno impressed him as about as sentimental as the Marquis de Sade.

Glancing around, Slate said, "I don't see any servants. Do you do all the housework in a big place like this yourself, Sancho?"

"The servants live in the other front tower," Moreno said. "There are four towers, one at each corner of the walls surrounding the courtyard. I only had the two front ones restored, as they alone comprise more room than the average mansion."

He turned and entered a hall which Slate guessed led to the rear of the building. Pedro prodded Slate after him with his gun. Consuelo and Barth rose and trailed after them.

This hallway was also lighted by candelabra converted to electricity. They passed one or two doors and finally came to a door which seemed to be to a kitchen. Moreno told Pedro to wait there with Slate and went into the kitchen. When he returned, he was carrying a huge hunk of raw meat which must have weighed four

pounds.

Slate examined it dubiously.

Remembering Sancho, Moreno's reference to his "pets" he wondered with a slight chill what sort of pets were fed four pounds of meat as a midnight snack.

The procession resumed its march down the hall, still in single file, until the corridor ended at an arched, iron-studded oaken door.

Moreno grasped a large iron ring and pulled the door open. Unused hinges rasped protestingly.

"I keep forgetting to have those oiled," Moreno said apologetically. "This door is used so seldom."

He flicked a wall switch and a light went on below. Moreno led the way down narrow stone stairs into the castle's dungeons.

The stairs ended in a large room which still contained medieval instruments of torture. There was a rack, a thumb screw, a flogging post, and rusted manacles hung from the walls where victims were once suspended by their wrists with their feet unable to touch the floor.

Moreno saw Slate looking at a rusted iron cage about five feet high, five feet long and three feet wide.

"The Spanish conquistador who built this place was a lay member of the Inquisition, Mr. Slate," he said. "That is one of the more imaginative yet simple devices of the Spanish Inquisition. You can't quite stand up in it, you can't quite lie down in it. After a few years the occupant began to become rather uncomfortable."

Slate made a face and glanced around. A half dozen doorways led off the torture chamber into individual cells. The doors were all closed. He saw a face peering through the barred aperture of one.

Seeing Slate look that way, Moreno smiled. "Merely a temporary occupant, Mr. Slate. A new recruit for our jingle writing team. As soon as his orientation and training is completed, he will be transferred to the studio grounds."

He went over to another of the heavy oaken doors and pulled it open. He flicked a wall switch just outside the door and a light went on inside.

Going in, he motioned Slate to follow. Pedro paused in the doorway, his gun covering Slate. Consuela and Barth remained outside.

The room was about twelve feet square, with damp stone walls and a floor of stone blocks. Only half of it was floored, however. Six feet from the door the floor abruptly ended at a pit six feet across and running the length of the room. The light Moreno had turned on, a single bare bulb, was suspended over the pit.

Moreno motioned Slate over to the edge of the pit. About ten feet

below was the surface of still, foul-smelling water.

"Clever man, Count Don Morales," Moreno said. "He was the Spanish nobleman who built this castle. This pit connects by underground channel to the moat surrounding the castle. The count deliberately left this route of escape open for prisoners whom it would not have been politically expedient to murder outright."

Slate cocked a quizzical eyebrow at him.

"Sometimes just the glow of light is enough to make them come to investigate," Moreno said. "But I haven't been down here in some time, and they have short memories. This should bring them."

He tossed the chunk of raw meat down into the water.

Nothing happened for several seconds. Then the water began to roll and froth as something below the surface churned it up. Slate saw the tips of several large scaly tails break the surface momentarily as their owners fought over the meat.

Finally the turmoil subsided. A half dozen huge snouts rose to the surface and beady eyes glared up-ward.

Enormous jaws opened and there was a chorus of bellowing roars from below.

"Alligators," Moreno said with pride. "The smallest measures twelve feet. We feed them regularly, of course, because otherwise they would die. But we always keep them about half starved, so that they remain alert sentries."

After staring down at the beasts for a time, Slate looked at Moreno. "Surely these can't be the same ones your Count Morales stocked the moat with. They would be four hundred years old!"

"Oh, no," Moreno said. "The moat had dried up and had filled with debris when I bought the castle. I had it redug and restocked with alligators from the Lombodia River. But it was the count's original idea. There are quite detailed historical records on the castle, and it was once a national museum before it was allowed to fall into ruins. I spent considerable money restoring it."

"Your own or THRUSH's?" Slate asked.

Moreno gave him a non-committal smile. Pointing to a small microphone and an equally small speaker fixed to the wall near the ceiling on the opposite side of the pit, he said, "Through those you will be able to converse with me at any time you wish, Mr. Slate. Being English, and also having been indoctrinated by U.N.C.L.E., I don't suppose you will wish to. But I want you to have every opportunity to save your life by telling us where to find Miss Dancer."

"How would I know?" Slate said. "I haven't seen her for hours."

"Perhaps you'll be able to hazard a guess after a time," Moreno said. "I really haven't much hope that you will talk, but it would be foolish not to try to make you. Good-by, Mr. Slate."

Pedro stepped aside to let Moreno pass through the door, then backed out himself. The door closed and a key turned. Slate went over to look through the small barred aperture in the door and saw the whole group moving toward the stairs. They disappeared up them and the light in the torture chamber went out. The one in Slate's cell over the pit remained on, however.

Slate tried the cell door, not really expecting to find it open, and was not disappointed that it was locked. With a shrug he walked over to the pit and looked down at the alligators.

At sight of him they set up a hungry roar.

What did Moreno expect to accomplish by this nonsense, he wondered? The huge reptiles were no danger so long as he stayed where he was. And he certainly had no intention of trying the underground tunnel as an escape route.

A rumbling sound caused him to turn and glance upward. A half-inch-thick sheet of steel the width of the room was sliding down from the ceiling to cover the door and the wall on that whole side of the room.

He went over to examine it, but did not touch it. Aside from effectively blocking any attempt to force the door, he failed to divine its purpose.

Sancho Moreno's voice came from the speaker on the other side of the pit. "You have noticed the new steel wall of your cell, I assume, Mr. Slate."

"Uh-huh," Slate said.

"Please note where it rests on the floor. That is, note the distance from the steel wall to the first cracks between the floor stones nearest to the wall."

Slate looked down at the floor. "About eight inches," he said. "What of it?"

"Nothing at the moment. Just keep it in mind."

Five minutes passed in silence.

Slate amused himself by making faces at the bellowing monsters below.

Moreno's voice came from the speaker again. "Mr. Slate?"

"Yeah?" Slate said.

"Please note where the steel plate rests on the floor now."

Slate turned and walked over to the wall. His heart began to thump when he saw that the crack between the stones which he had used as a point of reference was no longer visible. The floor stones were about two feet square, and the steel wall had moved a good four inches beyond the first crack.

In a controlled voice he said, "It seems that the room has shrunk about a foot."

“Exactly, Mr. Slate. The steel wall will continue to move toward the pit at the rate of a foot every five minutes. That gives you exactly twenty-five minutes more to decide if your loyalty to U.N.C.L.E. is worth a swim with my pets. At any time you decide to talk about Miss Dancer, I will be glad to reverse the wall’s direction.”

Slate said, “This must be your innovation, Sancho. Your conquistador friend didn’t install this thing.”

“Of course not, Mr. Slate. I possess a little imagination too. Incidentally, it will do you no good to try to hold back the steel wall. It is’ powered by hydraulic pressure of several tons. It will stop automatically when it reaches the edge of the pit, but no force but my finger flicking a switch could halt it sooner.”

Slate went back over to the edge of the pit and gazed down. The alligators spread their multi-toothed jaws and bellowed their hunger.

EIGHT

MOMENT OF TRUTH

The taxi driver was looking inquiringly along the bar when April Dancer stepped from the phone booth.

She said, “I called for you, driver.”

He turned to look at her, then grinned with open admiration. He was a wiry little man of about forty and his grin exposed large buck teeth. It was such an infectious grin, though, that she instantly liked him. His face seemed vaguely familiar, and she was trying to place it when it struck her that it looked familiar because he resembled Bugs Bunny.

He held open the tavern door for her, then the rear door of the taxi parked outside. She didn’t climb in immediately, however.

“Do you know Mr. Sancho Moreno?” she asked.

“The television man? Si, senorita. Senor Moreno is very big around here. A friend of the president, the mayor, the chief of police–most everyone of influence.”

Oh, fine, April thought. It was just as well she hadn’t phoned the police to report Mark’s kidnapping.

“Do you know where he lives?” she asked.

“You mean the castle?”

“Yes,” she said. “The castle.”

“Si, senorita. Everybody knows where the castle is.”

She climbed in back, the driver closed the door and rounded the cab to slip under the wheel.

“You wish to go to the castle, senorita?”

“Yes. How far is it?”

“About ten miles. It sits on the cliff overlooking Morales Bay.”

April knew where he meant. Vina Rosa was about ten miles inland on the Lombodia River, which emptied into Morales Bay. The city had been built there instead of on the coast because the coastal area was too mountainous. She had noted the fortification guarding Morales Bay from the air when she and Mark Slate flew into Vina Rosa, but because of its strategic location, had assumed it was a government owned fort. It hadn’t occurred to her that it could be a privately owned castle.

As the cab swung in a U-turn, April said, “How does Mr. Moreno happen to own a castle?”

“He bought it from the government,” the driver said, “It used to be

a museum, but it was not kept up, and was falling into ruins, Lombodia is not rich, and there was no money for repair, It was better to sell it to a foreigner who would restore it than let it crumble into a pile of broken stone. Who knows but maybe someday the government win inherit it back?"

A pragmatic point April thought. She said, "Tell me about the place."

"It is about four hundred years old," the little driver said. "It was built by Count Don Morales, after whom the bay is named. A quite terrible man. He brought Christianity to the Indians of Lombodia by using the machinery of the Inquisition. It is said that hundreds of natives perished in his torture chamber, as well as a number of noble Spaniards who were his political opponents."

"Sound like a nice man," April Dancer said. "Was he an ancestor of Moreno's?"

The little man chuckled. "I do not believe so, senorita. You are not fond of Senor Moreno?"

"No," April said briefly.

"I am glad. Few are, other than his high-placed friends. And it is whispered he buys their friendship. It is said he buys the friendship of beautiful young ladies also, and when you said you wished to go to the castle, I was saddened to think you might be one of those, it makes me happy that you are not."

"It makes me happy too," April said. "Tell me more about the castle."

"As I said, it had partially crumbled into ruins when Senor Moreno bought it. He completely restored and refurnished it, except for the two rear towers. There are four towers altogether, and he uses only the two front ones. The exteriors of the others have been restored, but not the interiors. Even the moat, which had dried up, was re-dug and refilled with water, and the drawbridge was repaired. Except for such modern conveniences as electricity, it is said to have been authentically restored to its original condition. I cannot vouch for this personally, because I have not been in it since Senor Moreno took it over. He does not permit tours. But that is what is said."

The route to the castle led through jungle for the first few miles, along a one-lane paved road similar to the one leading to San Cecilia. It became two-lane when they reached the mountains, because one-lane road was obviously no longer feasible in such rugged terrain. With the winding road sometimes edged by solid rock on one side and a sheer drop of fifty to a hundred feet on the other, there was nowhere to pull off to let another vehicle pass.

By now a bright moon had risen and the visibility was excellent. When they neared the castle, April suggested that the driver cut his

lights.

"Senor Moreno is not expecting you?" the man said.

"No."

The driver shrugged and cut his lights. A moment later he halted just before a curve.

"The road ends at the castle," he said. "It is just ahead. You wish me to wait?"

"Yes, please," April said. She climbed out.

"Senorita."

"Yes?" she said, peering at him through the window.

"Would you mind paying now?" She was mildly amused. The man had exhibited no curiosity as to the reason for her stealthy approach, but he must have suspected she had something illegal in mind. Apparently it didn't bother him to transport a passenger who might be a jewel thief, or even an assassin, but he didn't care to risk losing his fare in case she happened to be caught.

"Of course," she said. "How much?"

"Thirty pesos."

The Lombodian peso was currently worth ten cents American, which made the fare the equivalent of three dollars.

"Is that round-trip?" she asked. "Oh, no, senorita. Only one way."

She handed him a twenty and a ten peso note, considered a tip, then decided that the promise of a tip would be better bait to assure his waiting for her than giving him the money now.

"I will add a tip when we get back to Vina Rosa," she said.

"Gracias, senorita. I will maneuver the car around to face the other way so there will be no delay when you wish to depart."

His implication was that he assumed she might want to depart in a hurry, perhaps one jump ahead of pursuers. It intrigued her that he was so casually willing to assist in a conspiracy without knowing any of the details.

She couldn't help asking, "Don't you wonder what this is all about?"

"I am descended from caballeros, senorita," he said with a touch of pride. "One does not question the motives of a beautiful lady in distress. One merely offers what assistance one can." Then he grinned his Bugs Bunny grin. "Besides, I do not like Senor Moreno. He is the sort of man who treats waiters and cabbies like dirt. I will not desert you."

Since he was being so gallant, April decided to use him to copper her bet in case something went wrong at the castle. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Just midnight, senorita."

"If I have not returned within a half hour, don't wait for me any

longer. But will you do me a favor?"

"Of course, senorita."

"When you get back to Vina Rosa, phone the Hotel La Paz and ask for either Mr. Napoleon Solo or Mr. Illya Kuryakin. Can you remember those names?"

"Napoleon Solo or Illya what?"

"Kuryakin."

"Kuryakin," the driver repeated. "Mr. Napoleon Solo or Mr. Illya Kuryakin. I will remember."

"They should check in there some time around one. If they have not yet arrived when you call, keep trying until you reach them. Tell them where I am and that I'm in trouble. My name is April Dancer.'"

"Ah, a pretty name to fit a pretty girl. I am Frederico Feliz, Senorita Dancer."

"Glad to know you, Frederico.

Remember now–wait only a half hour."

She gave him a smile and moved on toward the curve in the road. Behind her she heard the taxi back and turn to park headed the other way.

The road came to an abrupt end only a few yards beyond the curve. It ended at the edge of a moat which surrounded the castle. On the other side of the moat, before a gate wide and high enough for a box car to pass through, a drawbridge had been elevated by its chains until it angled outward at about a thirty-degree angle.

Perched on a cliff overlooking the bay, the castle was square, with a round, three-story, flat-topped tower at each corner connected by thick stone walls about twenty feet high. Light came from the narrow windows of the right front tower on the ground floor and the second floor.

The water in the moat was about twelve feet across. April saw no choice but to swim it.

Kicking off her shoes, she stripped and wrapped everything, including her purse, into a tight package in her dress. She set the package on top of her head and used the belt of her dress to tie it firmly unto place, passing the belt under her chin and knotting it.

She was on the verge of slipping down the sloping bank of the moat into the water when there was a slight movement just below her. When she paused to peer downward, a set of enormous jaws yawned open not two feet from her bare toes.

The giant alligator surged up over the bank. April leaped backward a second before the powerful jaws closed with a snap, missing her legs by inches. Spinning, she ran a dozen yards down the road, then paused to stare back.

The reptile had given up the chase after only a few feet. He raised

his head to emit a frustrated bellow, then heaved his heavy body around and slid back over the edge of the bank to lie in wait for another victim.

So that was what Sancho Moreno meant by his “pets,” she thought. And he intended to feed Mark Slate to them! Suppose he already had?

Shuddering, April Dancer put her clothing back on. Swimming the moat was out. She would have to find some means of bridging it.

Cautiously she approached the edge of the water-filled ditch again, picking a point some yards to the right of the drawbridge. She drew a handkerchief and at perfume atomizer from her purse as she neared, then slipped the strap of the purse over her wrist in order to leave both hands free.

There was some debris lying along the edge of the moat: a few sticks of wood and some fallen tree branches from the gnarled mountain oaks spaced here and there around the castle. She wasn’t exactly sure of what she was looking for, but she vaguely hoped to find a piece of log large enough to float her across the water.

Halfway between the drawbridge and the tower from which light shown, she came to something which in the moonlight resembled a log. Just in case it wasn’t, she stopped a few feet away and stomped her foot.

It wasn’t a log. White-toothed jaws gaped wide as the monstrous reptile awakened.

April didn’t retreat this time. Pressing the specially treated handkerchief over her nose and mouth, she aimed the perfume atomizer and thumbed the valve upward instead of down.

A stream of tear gas caught the advancing monster squarely in his widespread jaws. With a roar of surprise, he changed direction, slithered over the bank and into the water. April could hear him thrashing around in the water and emitting a hissing noise for several seconds before he finally decided to submerge.

She moved on. She routed one more alligator with tear gas before coming to the point where the moat turned and ran along the right side of the castle, but she failed to spot anything which might serve as a raft.

She was now directly across from the tower from which light came. Just left of the tower was an arched tunnel in the wall about six feet across into which water from the moat flowed. She was wondering what its purpose was when one of the huge reptiles swam from the tunnel, gripping something in its mouth. It swam directly across to where she stood and started to climb the bank.

She waited until it was nearly to the top before squirting tear gas into its eyes from a distance off only a foot.

With a roar of anguish the scaly monster’s jaws parted, dropping

what it had gripped in them, it slid backward into the water and began threshing around.

April reached down and picked up the limp, water-soaked piece of cloth the alligator had dropped. Her heart began to thump when she recognized the checkered design.

It was the left half of Mark Slate's vest, torn right down the middle. And it was soaked not only with water, but with blood.

The piece of material fell from nerveless fingers and she stared at the tunnel again. By now the threshing had stopped and the alligator she had sprayed with tear gas had submerged. But five more were swimming from the tunnel. Their movement caused the still water to ripple, and in the moonlight the ripples suddenly seemed darker than the surrounding water.

April realized that the water surrounding the reptiles was stained with blood.

One of the beasts had a piece of cloth gripped in its jaws. As it reached the bank and started to climb up. April recognized it as Mark Slate's suit coat.

Her eyes brimming with tears, she turned and stumbled along the bank back to the road. She would have been easy prey for any of the monsters lying atop the bank in wait, but fortunately her previous passage had cleared the area and no new hunters had as yet taken the place of the ones routed by tear gas.

When April Dancer reached the road, she put away the atomizer. After dabbing at her eyes with the handkerchief, she put it away too. Squaring her shoulders, she clicked down the road on her high heels to the waiting taxi.

"You were twenty minutes," Frederico Feliz said with a smile. "Did you accomplish your purpose?"

"No," she said, climbing into the backseat. "Drive me to the CIX studio."

Her tone caused him to peer around. "Is something wrong, senorita?"

"Please," she said. "I would rather not talk about it."

With a shrug he put the car in gear. They had no conversation on the way back to Vina Rosa. The cabbie once made a comment that he was glad he wouldn't have to report to her friends that she was in trouble, but when she made only a monosyllabic reply, he lapsed into silence.

A block before the studio grounds April said, "This corner will be fine. Drop me here."

Obediently he pulled over to the curb.

Getting out, April said, "Is there a discount for round trip?"

Even in her grief she couldn't suppress her inclination to bargain.

April was the delight of U.N.C.L.E's accounting section, because she was as frugal with other people's money as she was with her own. Her spending habits weren't as highly regarded by other agents, though, because the chief accountant had a habit of using her expense sheets as an example when questioning the expenses of her more free spending colleagues.

The cabbie said, "No, senorita. But I do not charge for the wait. The fare is the same both ways.

April handed him a fifty peso note and got the twenty she had previously given him in exchange.

"I promised you a tip if you waited," she said, fumbled in her purse and handed him a coin.

The cabbie examined it with a mixture of astonishment and amusement. It was a single peso, or the American equivalent of a dime.

April braced herself for some withering comment of the sort she was used to her tips eliciting from New York cab drivers. But Lombodian cabbies were a politer breed.

Exposing his buck teeth in a Bugs Bunny grin, the little man said, "Thank you, senorita. Now I will be able to go into business for myself."

April braced her slim shoulders and thrust all thought of Mark Slate from her mind. There would be time for grief later. Now she had a job to do, and her U.N.C.L.E. training didn't allow the luxury of emotion until that was completed.

She turned right for a block, then left, and came out behind the studio, grounds. Since the cab had dropped her on the opposite side of the grounds from the way she had previously approached, this brought her to the corner of the fenced enclosure opposite where the hole in the fence was.

Staying on the far side of the street, she went past the rear gate by which she and Mark Slate had entered the grounds earlier, turned left again at the comer and eventually came to the hole in the fence covered by the piece of plywood.

Peering through the wire mesh, she studied the grounds carefully. No one was in sight. She pushed the plywood aside, crawled through and set it back in place again.

There were no lights showing on this side of the building containing the recording studio. She circled around to the other side and found that side dark too. She returned to the first side.

The barred grill Mark Slate had cut from the window frame still lay on the ground beneath the window to the recording studio.

Lifting it, April gently leaned it against the side of the building at an angle just beneath the window, the bars horizontal, so that it

formed an improvised ladder. By climbing to the top bar, she was able to reach the upper pane.

Slipping off one of her clip earrings, she pressed the stone against the glass next to the inner latch and drew a half circle. Clipping the earring back in place, she tapped the glass lightly with her knuckles.

The half circle of glass fell out in one piece. It made a small tinkling sound when it hit the floor inside. April waited, listening for a possible reaction. When there was none, she reached through the hole in the glass and unlatched the window.

She pushed the lower half of the window upward. A moment later she had climbed inside.

Stepping around the edge of the white velvet curtain, she struck her lighter and held it high. It didn't throw much glow, but it was enough to guide her past the camera and other equipment over to the black plywood screen before the door into the hall. She let the flame die before cracking open the door and cautiously peering into the hall.

There was a dim nightlight set in the wall at either end of the hallway, just sufficient to barely illuminate the full length of the corridor. No one was in sight.

She had no idea in which room the hairy Dingo slept, but it was possible he bunked with the mentally retarded jingle writers. On tiptoe she moved down the hall to that door. Pressing her ear to it she heard the sound of snoring in several different keys.

The door was locked, but her spring-steel hairpin quickly solved that problem. Removing her perfume atomizer and treated handkerchief from her purse, she hooked the strap of her purse over her wrist and boldly pushed the door wide open.

Enough light from the hall flowed into the room for her to make out the occupants dimly. The man with the whip wasn't among them.

The four jingle writers lay on pallets near the left wall, leg irons clamped around their right ankles and chained to rings attached to the base of the wall. They were all asleep, but the light from the hall awakened one. The hulking Carlos rose on one elbow and looked around at April Dancer.

April put a finger to her lips.

Carlos gave her a vacuous smile.

Going over to him, she knelt so that her lips were close to his ear and whispered, "I'm a friend, Carlos."

His grin turned to a delighted smile. "Duh-Carlos like friends."

"Shh!" she said. "Don't wake the others."

He gave an abashed glance at his snoring comrades. "Carlos sorry," he whispered. "I talk low."

"Do you want to get away from here, Carlos?"

His expression saddened. "Carlos want to go back to state home,"

he whispered. “They treat Carlos good there. They no whip.”

Glancing toward the door, April said in a low tone, barely moving her lips, “How did you happen to leave the state home, Carlos?”

“Man come to my room late at night. Skinny man with thick glasses. “

“Barth,” she said.

“Yes, that the man. Promise Carlos candy. We sneak out window. We go to great big place in mountains. Great towers and stone walls it had.”

“Sancho Moreno’s castle.”

“I no know its name. But they no give Carlos candy when we get there. Lock in dungeon, only let out to study and work. Then they bring here and all Carlos do is work.”

“So they kidnapped you out of a government-operated home,” April Dancer said grimly. She nodded toward the sleeping men, who were still snoring in rhythm. “These others too?”

Carlos nodded.

“I’ll get you out of this place and back to the home,” April promised. “But first I have to do something else. Where does Dingo sleep?”

“The whip man?” Carlos said with a shiver. “Just across hall.”

“I’ll be back,” April said.

She tiptoed back across the room, out into the hall and eased the door shut behind her.

The door to the room across the hall was locked. Picking the lock would almost certainly awaken Dingo, April thought. And she had no intention of barging into a room to face a man armed with an U.N. C.L.E. gun.

She glanced up and down the hall. Her gaze spotted a fire axe and hose hanging on the wan a few feet away.

Beneath the axe was a glass covered recess in the wall. She went over to examine it. It was a fire alarm. Behind the glass was a large round bell with an electric clapper.

There was a switch resembling an ordinary wall light switch next to the bell.

Printed directions on a card above the recess said in both English and Spanish: *In case of fire break glass and push bell switch upward.*

A few yards farther along the hall was a water cooler with an inverted bottle. Attached to the wall next to it was a plastic cup dispenser.

April Dancer filled three of the flat-bottomed cups water and set them on the floor next to the baseboard. From her purse she took a package of mints and dropped a mint into each cup. Immediately a thick white smoke began to billow from the cups.

Quickly she moved back to the fire alarm. Slipping off one shoe, she used the spike heel to smash the glass. She slipped the shoe back on before flipping up the bell switch. The bell started to set up an earsplitting clangor.

By now the smoke was so dense, she had to feel for Dingo's doorway when she reached it. She flattened herself against the wall alongside of it, her treated handkerchief pressed over her nose and mouth.

She could tell when the door opened by the sudden glow of light through the dense smoke. She couldn't see the hairy Dingo when he emerged, but she heard him stumble past, coughing. Something brushed her hip lightly, and she realized it was the tip of the riding whip. Apparently the hairy man reached for his whip in emergencies with the same sort of instinct which makes children run for their mothers.

She slipped into the room, closed the door and threw an inner bolt. It would have done her no good to pick the door lock anyway, she realized as she shot the bolt home.

A ceiling light was burning. The room was hazy with smoke, but not enough had seeped in from the hall during the short time the door was open to obscure Vision. She glanced around.

The single window was open a few inches from the bottom. Crossing to it, she raised it the rest of the way to clear the air, then put away her handkerchief.

The room was not very large and was furnished sparsely. There was a dresser in the corner near the door, one straight-backed chair and a single-width cot against the wall opposite the dresser.

Going over to the cot, she heaved the mattress onto the floor and looked down with satisfaction at the three round tins resting on the linen cover of the springs. She checked their labels just to make sure. They were labeled respectively*: Lito's Fritos Commercial, Upsa-Daisy Commercial and Piggy-Wiggy Commercial.*

The last sounded as though it would be even more revolting than the other two, April thought with a shudder. She was glad she didn't have to listen to it.

She opened the tins and, one at a time, let the tapes unwind into a pile on the floor. Then she took out her lighter, pressed a secret catch and flicked it alight. The flame which spurted from it wasn't the ordinary one used to light cigarettes. It was blue white and hissed out for a distance of six inches. It was also hot enough to cut through steel.

Stooping, she directed the flame at the tangled mass of tape.

The tapes had been reduced to ashes when the doorknob was rattled from outside.

"Hey!" Dingo's voice called thickly. "Who bolted this door?"

April moved over between the dresser and the door, set her purse on the dresser and reached out to slide open the bolt. Then she pressed her back to the wall next to the door.

The door crashed back against the wall on the opposite side of the doorway from April. The hairy Dingo, clad in purple pajamas and barefoot, loomed in the doorway, glaring around from streaming eyes. The U.N.C.L.E. gun was thrust out before him. The riding whip was in his left hand. Smoke billowed into the room from behind him.

April reached out and grasped the man's gun wrist with both hands. Twisting it down, backward and then upward, she swung her back to him and heaved with all of her one hundred and eight pounds.

Dingo did a complete flip and landed on his back with a crash. The gun leaped from his hand. April caught it in midair as it headed for the floor.

Through the thickening mist she saw the man bounce to his knees and pivot to face her. His face distorted into a snarl and his left arm drew back until the whip was behind him. It started to lash forward at her face.

April felt to make sure the lever of the U.N.C.L.E. gun was in the up position, aimed and pressed the trigger. There was a dull popping noise, Dingo's expression grew vacant and his body slowed to slow motion.

April jerked back her head and the tip of the riding whip just gently brushed her chin as it slowly swept past. Dingo's body continued to twist, also in slow motion from the momentum of the whiplash. He turned nearly completely around before falling heavily on the back of his left shoulder. He stretched out on his back and lay still.

Retrieving her bag from the dresser, April dropped the U.N.C.L.E. gun into it. The smoke was still thick in the hall, but when she slipped into the room housing the mentally retarded jingle writers, only enough had seeped beneath the door to cause a slight mist. She shut the door behind her to keep any more from entering the room, found a wall switch and turned on the overhead light.

The four men were all awake and sitting up. The expressions on their faces were those of frightened children.

"What that noise?" Carlos asked fearfully.

Until that moment April hadn't realized the bell had stopped clanging. Dingo must have turned it off while she was preoccupied with burning the tapes.

"Just a false alarm," April said reassuringly. "There isn't any fire. This smoke comes from some harmless smoke pots."

Carlos' expression turned to one of relief.

“This my friend,” he announced to the others. “She going to take us take to the home.”

They all looked up at her with wondering but trusting smiles.

Five minutes later April had picked the locks of all the leg manacles. The men had been sleeping in their clothes, except for shoes. She waited while they located those and put them on, then led them through the still dense smoke to the nearest exit from the building.

NINE

THE SECRET OF THE MOAT

It was two when April Dancer arrived back at the hotel. She alit from the front seat of a station wagon with lettering on its side reading; *Lombodia State Home For The Mentally Retarded.*

Thanking the driver, she said good-by to the four men seated in back and entered the lobby. At the desk she inquired if Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin had checked in.

About an hour ago, Senorita Dancer," the clerk said. "They inquired of you and Senor Slate and asked that you go to their room as soon as either of you came in."

"What's the number?" April asked.

"One-eleven, senorita. Just down the rear hall, off the lobby."

April walked down the indicated hall and knocked on the door of room 111. The door was opened by a slim but muscular man with a lean, sensitive face and long blond hair which drifted over his forehead and partially covered his ears. He was in shirt-sleeves.

Illya Kuryakin's usually serious face broke into a smile.

"Hello, April," he said. "We were beginning to worry about you."

"Hello, Illya," she said without any return smile. He stepped aside and she moved into the room.

Napoleon Solo, also in shirt-sleeves, rose from the far twin bed on, which he had been seated and rounded the nearer one. "How are you, April?" he asked.

"I'm awful," she said.

Both men sobered immediately. "Mark?" Kuryakin asked.

She gave a hopeless nod.

Solo said, "Mr. Waverly contacted us just as we landed and told us you were headed for some castle to rescue him. Were you too late?"

"Yes."

Solo took April's elbow and steered her over to the nearest bed. He had her sit down and sat next to her. Illya Kuryakin stood looking down at them.

"Let's have it all," Solo said.

In a low voice April Dancer recounted everything which had happened up to the time she led the four mentally retarded men from the smoke-filled building.

"There is a tavern only a couple of blocks from the studio," she concluded. "I looked up the number of the home for the mentally

retarded there and got the superintendant out of bed. When I explained that I had four of his missing charges in tow, he sent a station wagon. The driver kindly dropped me off at the hotel."

"Didn't you phone the police also?" Kuryakin asked. "Moreno and his crew are certainly guilty of kidnapping and of involuntary servitude."

She laughed shortly. "Sancho Moreno has the chief of police in his pocket. The president of Lombodia, the mayor of Vina Rosa and the chief of police are all on Moreno's payroll. Look–the man who showed up driving the station wagon was the home's assistant superintendant. He was spitting nails over the treatment his charges received until I told him Sancho Moreno was behind it all. Then he turned pale and didn't say another word."

Napoleon Solo said, "In that case, I don't suppose the police would be very enthusiastic about investigating Mark's murder either."

"I doubt that they would even question Moreno, except perhaps as a formality."

Solo examined her thoughtfully. "All you really saw in the moat was Mark's vest and coat and some red in the water. It's not exactly what you'd call a corpus delecti."

"I had the piece of vest in my hand," April said. "It was torn in half and stained with blood. I know blood when I see it."

Solo rose to his feet with an air of determination. "Still, we're not going to write off Mark until we're absolutely certain. Let's drive out to this castle."

April gazed up at him hopefully.

"You think there's a chance?"

"Not much," he admitted. "I can't imagine why an alligator would be carrying around a piece of blood-stained vest unless Moreno carried out his plan to feed Mark to his pets. But, if he is dead, I still want to visit that castle. I have a vengeful nature."

"We're going to see if the alligators find Mr. Moreno as delectable as Mark?" Kuryakin inquired.

"Something like that. Illya, how are we going to get across that moat?"

The blond man pursed his lips.

"This drawbridge, April. Does it lie flat against the wall when it is drawn up?"

"No, it leans out at about a thirty-degree angle."

Kuryakin went over to a suitcase lying on a chair, opened it and rummaged beneath the packed clothes in it. He drew out a coil of thin nylon rope. Slipping his left arm through the loop, he drew it up until it was looped around his shoulder.

Going over to the closet, he drew out his suit jacket and put it on.

The coiled rope was completely concealed under it.

"Shall we go?" he inquired. Napoleon Solo went over to the closet and put on a coat also.

April said, "We may as well phone for a cab from here."

Solo smiled at her. "We rented a car at the airport."

"Oh," April said.

Illya Kuryakin courteously held the door open for her, then followed her out, Solo bringing up the rear.

They fell in on either side of her as they crossed the lobby. April glanced from Illya's brooding, sensitive face to the serene, self-assured face of the slightly taller Napoleon Solo.

Neither man gave the impression that he would be a particularly deadly opponent, but April knew from experience just how ruthlessly deadly both could be when the situation called for it. She was glad they were on her side. She didn't hold out much hope for Sancho Moreno.

When the space between the slowly advancing steel wall and the pit had contracted to three feet, Mark Slate tested Moreno's claim that several tons of pressure were behind the steel wall by attempting to hold it back. It seemed apparent that Moreno had told the truth, because he couldn't even slow the inexorable advance.

He examined the other side of the pit for something he might hang on to. Both the microphone and speaker were set into the wan and there were no other projections. The light suspended over the pit hung from the ceiling on a chain, but the ceiling was a good eleven feet from the floor. And there was nothing to stand on.

There was only one desperate chance, Slate decided. It was one which would require superb muscular coordination, plus a great deal of luck.

Mark Slate possessed the former. He could only hope for the latter to develop.

In order to be encumbered by binding clothing as little as possible when it came time to make his desperate try for survival, he took off his suit coat and vest and lay them on the floor. Then he stood with his back to the steel wall and let it push him slowly toward the pit

When he was balanced on a ledge only a foot wide, Moreno's voice came from the speaker again.

"Mr. Slate?"

"Uh-huh," Slate said.

"You know you have only minutes now to make up your mind. Have you come to a decision?"

"Yeah," Slate said:

"What?"

“Go spit up a rope.”

A sigh came from the speaker.

“I was afraid you would continue to remain heroically stupid. Goodbye, Mr. Slate.”

“So long, Sancho,” Slate said calmly.

The ledge had now contracted to six inches. The coat and vest lying on the floor had been pushed closer and closer to the edge of the pit, and now the coat slid over the edge into the water below.

The alligators, which had ceased their bellowing but were still hungrily eyeing the prospective meal teetering on the ledge above them, immediately began roaring and fighting over the garment.

“Mr. Slate!” Moreno’s voice said sharply.

“Still here,” Slate said. “They’re just fighting for position. They all seem to want to be immediately beneath me.”

The vest slid over the edge, causing another furious battle below.

By now the ledge had shrunk to three inches. Balanced on his heels, with his arms straight out from his sides, his palms pressed against the steel wall, Slate felt the moving wall nudge him forward another fraction of an inch. It shifted his center of gravity just enough so that he slowly tipped forward like a falling timber.

Deliberately he emitted a scream, then let it taper off into a gurgling gasp.

The scream muffled the sound of his outstretched palms slapping against the damp stone wall on the opposite side of the pit. With his heels hooked over the rim of the ledge behind him and his hands braced against the stone wall, he remained suspended over the pit at about a forty-five degree angle. Below, the famished monsters set up an increased roaring.

Another regretful sigh issued from the speaker and Moreno’s voice muttered something about idiot Englishmen.

Now came the element of luck.

If Sancho Moreno allowed the steel wall to continue its movement clear to the very edge of the pit, Slate knew he was doomed. Only his heels hooked over the damp stone edge kept him from falling. If they were pushed off, he knew the moisture-covered stone would be too slippery for friction between his shoe sales and the wall to hold him in place. His feet would simply slide down the surface of the wall and he would tumble into the pit.

His only hope lay in Moreno deciding there was no point in letting the wall move farther, now that Slate had fallen into the pit.

The sheet of steel pushed at his heels. He felt his feet shoved forward until only half the forward edge of his heels rested on the rim of the pit.

He had given up hope when the movement of the steel wall

suddenly stopped. Then it reversed itself. His feet slipped backward again a quarter inch and the heels of his shoes again solidly gripped the pit's edge.

The steel sheet retreated much faster than it had moved forward. Within a half minute it had reached its starting position. Slate allowed his body to move forward and down until his arms were bent nearly double, tensed his muscles and suddenly straightened his arms to thrust himself away from the stone wall.

His body erect now, he teetered on his heels for a heart-stopping moment, started to fall forward again and flailed his arms wildly. He managed to regain balance; his body slowly leaned backward; then his knees bent, his hands shot downward to break his fall and he gently sat down. At the last moment his heels slid out from under him on the moist stone floor so that his feet protruded over the edge of the pit, but it no longer mattered, because he was seated safely on the floor.

With catlike grace he was instantly on his feet again. The sheet of steel rumbled upward and disappeared through the slot in the ceiling.

Slate pressed his back against the wall next to the iron-studded oaken door and waited.

Apparently the steel wall was operated from some room above, for it was several minutes before he heard footsteps coming down the stone stairway into the torture chamber. Meantime, now that Slate was no longer in view, the alligators had ceased bellowing.

Slate could distinguish only one set of footsteps. He was afraid to peer through the small barred aperture in the door to check if only one person was coming, because it would be disastrous to be seen before the door opened. He could only hope that his hearing had been accurate.

A key grated in the cell door's lock and the door opened outward. Sancho Moreno came through the doorway and took a step toward the pit.

From the corner of his eye Moreno caught sight of Slate, and his reaction was instantaneous. He whirled and ducked just as Slate started a karate chop at his neck

The blow sliced air harmlessly.

Moreno kicked out at Slate's knee and the latter avoided the kick by jumping back. Then they were circling each other, their extended hands raised palm out in the traditional stance of judo opponents.

Moreno was as expert in the art as he was, Slate learned when he feinted the man into making an attack, then suddenly kicked him in the chest. The kick landed solidly enough to bring a grunt from the larger man, but Slate felt his ankle grasped and he was jerked off balance.

As his other foot slid out from under him on the slippery stone

floor, Slate shot his hands beneath him to break his fall. The instant his palms slapped on the floor, he kicked upward with his free foot.

The kick caught Moreno beneath the chin. He released his grip on Slate's ankle and staggered backward.

Slate had bounced to one knee when Moreno recovered his balance by gripping both sides of the doorway as he staggered backward through it. Using the door frame for leverage, he instantly hurled himself forward again.

Slate, on one knee with his back to the pit, had no time either to bounce to his feet or spin out of the way. As Moreno's outstretched hands gripped his throat, he shot his right hand between them and gathered a handful of shirt-front. Letting Moreno's momentum carry him over backward, he rolled onto his back, planted both feet in the man's midriff and thrust upward.

Moreno's hands left his throat and the man's body performed an arc through the air. For an instant it was suspended upside down over the pit, then Moreno emitted an agonized scream as it plummeted downward.

There was a splash, a flurry of threshing noises and a final muffled scream which broke off abruptly.

Slate lay on the floor, listening, until the horrible noises from the pit began to subside. Then he rose to his feet. By now it seemed obvious that Moreno had descended to the dungeons alone, but nevertheless he peered out into the torture chamber with caution. No other enemies were awaiting him there.

The cell from which Slate had seen the face of the retarded prisoner peering through the barred aperture in the door was on the opposite side of the torture chamber. He took the heavy iron key which Sancho Moreno had left in his own cell lock and tried it in the lock of that door. Apparently all the locks were identical, because it opened.

The opening of the door awakened the prisoner, who had been sleeping on a straw-filled pallet fully clothed, except for shoes. Slate flicked on a light switch just outside the door. The man sat up and looked at him blankly. He was a thin scarecrow of a man with curiously vacant eyes.

"What's your name?" Slate asked.

"Juan," the prisoner said.

"My name is Mark, Juan. I'm not one of those who brought you here. I'm a prisoner too. You don't have to be afraid of me."

The man exposed large yellow teeth in a smile.

"You want to get out of here?" The smile broadened into an eager grin. "You take Juan back to home, Mark?"

He said, "Sure, Juan. But we'll have to be very quiet. If they hear

us, they'll lock both of us up again."

Juan nodded. "I be very quiet. I walk like mouse."

He pulled on a pair of heavy shoes lying next to his pallet, tied them, concentrating on the job like a six-year-old, then rose to his feet.

Slate led the man up the stone stairway to the heavy oaken door there. The door was closed but unlocked. The rasping of the un-oiled springs seemed to Slate to reverberate throughout the building when he pushed it open, but no one came to investigate.

Bulbs in several of the candelabra along the hallway were burning. Lights were still on in the huge banquet room at the end of the hall.

Slate moved quietly along the corridor. At its end he motioned Juan to stay back while he peeked around the corner. Apparently everyone but Moreno had gone to bed, because the room was empty.

An archway on the opposite side of the room led into a foyer beyond which was the only entrance to the building. This was an enormous double door, barred from inside by a four-by-four oaken beam resting in iron brackets bolted to either side of the door.

Slate had Juan get on one end of the beam. He took hold of the other. As quietly as possible they lifted it from its brackets and set it on the floor. The hinges of this main door were well-oiled, Slate discovered when he pushed one side of the great double door open. It moved easily and silently.

He looked out into the moonlit courtyard, started to step outside, then paused. A huge Irish wolfhound lay on the flagstones at the base of the short, flight of steps leading down to the courtyard. The beast raised its head, looked up at Slate and growled.

"Nice doggie," Slate whispered hopefully.

The animal heaved to its feet, placed its forepaws on the lowest step and exposed fangs in a snarl. The snarl brought three more hulking, hairy shapes from the shadows to investigate what was going on.

They all rested forepaws on the lowest step and stared up at Slate, their lips curling backward.

"Nice doggies," Slate whispered, and risked a step forward.

The dog who had been lying at the base of the steps, apparently the leader of the pack, instantly charged. The others followed his lead. Slate barely had time to step back inside and jerk the door closed when heavy bodies hit it from outside.

A series of low growls came from the other side of the door. At least the dogs didn't seem to have the habit of barking, Slate thought gratefully. If his sudden slamming of the door hadn't awakened anyone, it was unlikely the dogs' growling would.

Going over to the archway into the banquet hall, he looked toward

the broad stairway leading to the second floor and listened. When there was no sound from above and no sign of anyone, he returned to the door and motioned Juan to lift his end of the oaken beam. Together they set it back in its brackets.

"There should be some way to get up on top of the wall from upstairs," Slate whispered. "We'll have to go that way."

He led the way across the banquet room and up the broad stairway to the second floor. Two bulbs were burning in candelabra in the upper corridor. There was no sound and no one was in sight.

Slate estimated by its location that the room immediately to their left, at the top of the stairs, would look out over the castle's front wall. There would still be the problem of getting down from the wall and across the alligator-infested moat, but he planned to tackle those problems as he reached them. At least this route would get them out of the tower and at the same time keep them beyond the reach of the wolfhounds.

The door was closed. Slate eased it open a crack, but could see nothing because the room was dark. Cautiously he pushed it farther open until light from the hall spilled inside.

The light fell on a huge, high-backed bed similar to the one in which he had awakened from his drugged sleep.

Unfortunately the occupant of the bed was a light sleeper. The instant the glow from the hall touched his face, he sat bolt upright, swept a pair of thick-lensed spectacles from a bedside stand and slipped them on his nose. Slate tensed to rush the man, then abruptly changed his mind when Barth made a second quick grab for the bedside table.

Instead he pulled the door closed with a bang just as the gun swung toward him.

TEN
LAST CALL.

Come on," Slate said to Juan, and headed down the corridor at a dead run.

There was no further point in stealth. When he reached the room overlooking the side wall of the castle, he slapped his palm down on the latch and hit it with his shoulder.

Luckily it was unlocked. The door crashed open and he stumbled into the room. Juan scurried through behind him an instant before a shot sounded from up the hall and a bullet smashed into the door frame.

Slate slammed the door, felt for the inside bolt and shoved it home.

The room was in darkness, but moonlight outlined the single high, narrow window. As Slate moved toward it, bedsprings creaked and Consuela Cortez's husky voice said, "Who is that? What is going on?"

Slate was at the window then.

Originally it no doubt had been glassless, but it had been fitted with a modern cantilever frame. It was wide open and there was no screen.

Three feet below he saw the welcome sight of the yard-wide top of the castle wall.

He had dropped to the wall and Juan was scrambling through the window after him when a lamp went on in the room behind them. Simultaneously a pounding came from the bedroom door and Barth's voice yelled, "Consuelo!"

Juan jumped down to the wall and they raced along it toward the rear tower.

The distance between the two towers was about a hundred and fifty feet. As the rear towers had been restored only externally, there was no window glass to impede them here. Slate scrambled through into a musty smelling room and helped Juan through the window behind him.

Slate looked back to see the skull-faced Barth, wearing pajamas and slippers and with a gun in his hand, climbing from Consuelo's window.

By the moonlight streaming through the window Slate could see there was no furniture in the room. The floor was heavy with dust. There was the sound of a rat scurrying into the corridor.

There were heavy oaken shutters which opened inward. Since the castle was some four hundred years old and these probably were the original shutters, Slate was a little dubious about them working effectively.

Half expecting them to fall from their rusted hinges the moment he attempted to move them, he reached out with both hands to pull them closed.

Although they moved stiffly and the hinges made a shriek of protest, he was pleasantly surprised to find that they still worked. At first the inside bolt refused to slide home, but when he struck it with the heel of his hand it moved slightly. By working it back and forth he managed to get it halfway home before it balked at moving any farther. This was enough to lock it, however.

With the shutters closed the room was pitch dark. Slate felt in his trouser pockets and was agreeably surprised to find that his captors had left him a packet of matches.

By match light he led the way into the corridor and up it to the room overlooking the castle's rear wall. By the flickering flame they

could see countless animal tracks in the dust of the corridor, and could hear the rustling of rats in the various rooms they passed.

The shutters of the window overlooking the rear wall hadn't survived the centuries. One side was still in place, but the other had rusted from its hinges and had fallen to the floor.

Slate and Juan dropped down onto the rear wall and ran toward the next tower. Halfway there, a fusillade of shots sounded from the direction of the side wall. Slate assumed it was Barth firing at them, but the man must have been a poor shot, because not a single slug came close enough for him to hear its passage.

Then they had reached the next tower and had scrambled inside through the window. Looking back, Slate saw Barth ineffectively pushing at the bolted shutters of the tower they had just left.

The ancient shutters were still in place here. Again Slate had some difficulty with them, but he managed to get them closed and bolted. Again he led the way by match light along a corridor to the room overlooking the second sidewall. This corridor showed rat tracks too, and they could hear the rodents scurrying about in the rooms they passed.

Sancho Moreno had mentioned that the servants occupied the other front tower. As they reached the window overlooking the wall running between the tower they were in and the one housing the servants, Slate saw that a number of lights had gone on. Either Barth's shooting had awakened them, or Consuelo had alerted them by phone, for a man with a shotgun appeared in the window at the opposite end of the wall.

As he dropped down to the wall and started to move their way, Slate recognized him as his and April's studio tour guide, Pedro Martinez.

Slate tested the shutters at this window, found them in even better shape than the other two operable pair, closed them and bolted them.

Lighting another match, he told Juan to follow him and led the way downstairs. The door into the courtyard was still intact and was barred by an oaken beam.

Exploration of the first floor disclosed that no windows overlooked the courtyard. The ones on the other side of the tower were directly over the moat, whose water was about fifteen feet below. In the moonlight a half dozen alligators could be seen lying on the far banks. Slate decided they didn't have to worry about invasion from that way.

"Well, I guess we can't get out, Juan," Slate said. "But they can't get in either, unless they come up with a battering ram. Let's go up to the third floor and see what's going on."

When the rented car reached the curve in the road just before the

castle, Illya Kuryakin turned it around and parked it in the same spot the taxicab had parked earlier. April, Solo and Kuryakin all got out and walked up the road to the drawbridge.

All the windows on the first two floors of both front towers were ablaze with lights.

Napoleon Solo said, "Must be having a party."

"Something is going on," April said. "Only a few lights in the right tower were burning when I was here before."

One of the monstrous alligators, possibly the same one which had first tried to make a meal of April, since it was lying in wait in the same spot, came lumbering over the bank of the moat when he heard them approach.

Solo drew his U.N.C.L.E. gun, aimed at the gaping jaws from a distance of four feet and squeezed the trigger.

Following the low popping sound of the gun, the beast's jaws clapped shut and it slid tail first back down into the water, where it lay inert, half in and half out.

Kuryakin said in a low voice, "Keep your eye out for others. I'm going to have my attention directed upward."

He slipped his arm from the left sleeve of his jacket, removed the rope coiled around his shoulder and put the jacket back on. After forming one end of the rope into a large noose, he looked up at the drawbridge.

The U.N.C.L.E. gun popped again and a second monster slid back down the bank to lie still. Kuryakin didn't even glance down at it. Twirling the noose over his head several times, he cast it upward in a perfect, effortless throw. The noose settled over a corner of the raised drawbridge. A jerk on the rope tightened it into place.

"I didn't know you had ever been a cowboy," April whispered.

"I have a hundred small, unappreciated talents," Illya whispered back.

He tested the grip of the noose by giving the end of the rope several hard tugs, then handed the rope to Napoleon Solo.

"You're heavier than I am," he said. "So you be anchor man."

Solo gave a final glance both ways along the bank of the moat. When he spotted no more of the reptiles, he put away his gun. Winding the end of the rope about his right hand, he gripped it with his left also, drew it taut, then braced his feet and leaned backward until it was as tense as a violin string.

The rope slanted upward across the moat at about a thirty-degree angle.

Illya Kuryakin stepped to the edge of the bank, took hold of the rope with both hands and pulled himself along it hand over hand. When he reached the upraised edge of the drawbridge, he pulled

himself up on it and straddled it.

"I guess you're next," Solo said to April.

April had caught a slight movement to her right. "Just a minute," she said, and drew from her purse the U.N.C.L.E. gun she had recovered from the hairy Dingo.

A twelve-foot alligator surged over the bank not three feet from her. When its enormous jaws spread, she fired a sleep dart down its throat. It reared up, fell heavily on its side, then rolled over and over down the bank into the water.

April carefully searched the bank in both directions before putting the gun away. Then she slipped the strap of her purse over her wrist, let it slide up to her shoulder and took hold of the rope with both hands. Swinging her feet out over the water, she worked her way across.

Illya reached down to grab both her wrists and effortlessly pulled her one hundred and eight pounds up alongside of him.

"How am I supposed to get across?" Napoleon Solo called softly.

"You don't," Illya called back in an equally soft voice. "We'll need you over there as anchor man in case we have to come back by the same route."

Because the drawbridge leaned outward from the base of the wall at an angle, Illya Kuryakin and April Dancer were perched about four feet out from the wall. The chains which raised and lowered the bridge slanted upward to giant pulleys on top of the wall, however. Illya scrambled up one with the agility of a monkey, then held down his hand to assist April up beside him on top of the wall.

They crouched side by side in the shadow of one of the giant pulleys and viewed the moonlit castle and courtyard.

Considerable activity was going on at the left hand rear tower.

Six figures stood on the side wall next to the tower. One, in a dressing robe, April recognized as Consuelo Cortez, even at that distance. A man, also in a robe, with pajama legs showing beneath it, she identified as the cadaverous Barth.

The other four, all men, were fully dressed. One, who was carrying a shotgun, turned his profile to them as he said something to Barth, and, April recognized him as their studio tour guide, Pedro Martinez.

"I don't see Sancho Moreno," she whispered to Illya. "But that woman is Consuelo Cortez. The man in robe and pajamas is Barth and the one with the shotgun is Pedro Martinez."

"You don't know any of the others?" he whispered back.

She shook her head. "Just some of Moreno's goons, I imagine."

Three of the men were raising a ladder from the top of the wall to the sill of the tower's third-story window. A series of low growls

caused April and Illya to glance down into the courtyard. Immediately below them four huge Irish wolfhounds paced back and forth, glaring up at them.

Fortunately the backs of the entire group on the wall were to April and Kuryakin, and the dogs' growling was too low-toned to attract anyone's attention. Illya put his finger to his lips, rose from his crouched position and climbed over the giant pulley. After helping April over it, he moved silently toward the tower to their left. April tiptoed after him.

Below the pack of dogs followed along, growling up at them.

When they reached the tower, they found a long, narrow window about three feet above the wall. It was a cantilever window and was wide open. Illya Kuryakin cautiously peered into the room, then lightly vaulted up onto the sill. He held down one hand to assist April up.

A bedside lamp was burning in the room. The bedclothes were disarranged as though someone had been sleeping there, but the bed was empty. Through the open door they could see a lighted corridor.

Illya peered into the hall, then led the way along it, warily peering around the edge of each door they passed. The rooms were not occupied, although lights were on in several and there were empty beds with disarranged bed clothing.

Illya turned into the room at the end of the corridor after checking it. It too was a bedroom and an overhead light burned in it. Apparently this was an unoccupied room, though, for the bed was made up neatly.

The window of this room overlooked the side wall. When they peered out, only five people were now on the other end of the wall. A man was steadying the ladder from either side and a third leaned his weight against it.

Consuela and Barth were staring straight upward.

Pedro Martinez, still carrying his shotgun, was nearly to the top of the ladder.

Suddenly a figure appeared, standing in the third-story window. Gripping the frame on both sides, he put his foot against the upper rung of the ladder.

"That's Mark!" April exclaimed. "So it is," Illya said calmly.

"That blood on his vest must have been someone else's."

Barth aimed a pistol upward, but was unable to fire because the man at the top of the ladder was in the way. Mark Slate's foot shoved outward. The men at the base or the ladder made a desperate effort to hold it in place, but the weight of the man on top of it was too much for them. Slowly it toppled backward.

The man in front of the ladder suddenly realized it was going to topple over on him. Releasing his grip, he turned, slipped between Consuela and Barth and began to run toward April and Kuryakin. Losing his help, the other two men abandoned any further hope of holding it. Releasing their grips, they backed against the tower.

Consuela realized the danger next and began to flee after the man who had preceded her. It took Barth a moment longer to realize he was directly in line of the falling ladder, then he turned and began to run after Consuela.

The shotgun hit the top of the wall stock first, discharged harmlessly upward and bounced down into the courtyard. Pedro, still clinging to the ladder, hit an instant later.

Two of the figures fleeing from the falling ladder managed to make it. But the falling man crashed down right on top of Barth.

There were yells of pain; then both figures, plus the ladder, tumbled off the wall into the moat. A flurry of threshing sounds followed the splashes.

There was one muffled scream of agony, then silence.

April Dancer and Kuryakin had ducked back to either side of the window when the trio began running toward them. When the sound of running stopped, they peeped out. The two survivors had halted at midpoint along the wall and were staring down into the moat. Then they both turned their backs and gazed up at the third-story window where Mark Slate had appeared.

He was no longer in sight. Consuelo's voice carried clearly to April and Illya. "You three stay here and keep them pinned down," she said with frigid lack of emotion. "I'm going to get dressed and run into town for some dynamite. We'll blast the door from the courtyard into the tower open."

There was an inhuman quality about the woman, April thought. After that one quick glance into the moat where Barth and Pedro had fallen, she seemed to have dismissed them from her mind.

The man who had escaped the falling ladder with Consuelo returned to where his two partners waited next to the shuttered second-floor window of the tower. Consuela continued on toward the room where April and Illya waited.

They drew back. Illya Kuryakin produced his U.N.C.L.E. gun and April took Mark's from her purse.

Consuela climbed to the window sill and jumped to the floor inside. She must have glimpsed April's figure from the edge of her vision, because she whirled that way and stared at the barrel of April's gun.

"Don't move," Illya's voice said softly from behind her.

The woman glanced over her shoulder and saw his gun covering

her also. Her eyes glittered at him.

Kuryakin said quietly, “Call those three men back in here, Consuela.”

“Why should I?” the female hypnotist demanded. “You won’t shoot me in cold blood.”

April Dancer said sweetly, “Mark won’t. He’s much too gallant. But if you don’t obey right now, I’m going to.”

She depressed the lever on the U.N.C.L.E. gun which converted it to a killing weapon.

Consuelo examined her doubtfully. The glitter in April’s eyes seemed to convince her that the girl meant it. While she might have depended on Mark not to shoot down a defenseless woman, she had no such faith in another member of her own sex.

Going over to the window, she called, “Chance! You and the others come in here!”

“All right, ma’am,” a voice called back.

“Now step aside from the window,” April ordered.

Consuela chose to move over next to Illya.

April Dancer flicked the lever on her gun upward. The gun made a popping sound. Consuela’s eyes glazed and she toppled to the floor.

Illya Kuryakin gave April an inquiring look.

“It’ll keep her quiet while we deal with the others,” April said. “She might have decided to warn them at the last minute.”

With a shrug Illya pressed his back to the wall alongside the window. April did the same on the other side.

A moment later the first of the three men vaulted up to the window sill, then jumped down inside. He was staring at the unconscious Consuelo when the second man landed alongside of him. The third was standing in the window before either of the first two realized the presence of someone else in the room.

They whirled, reaching for guns, then froze when they saw Illya’s gun covering them. April’s was directed at the man standing on the window sill.

“Come on in and join us,” April said politely.

Moments later the trio had been disarmed and stood dejectedly lined up against a wall.

“Anyone else in the castle?” Illya asked generally.

When no one answered, his U.N.C.L.E. gun made a popping noise and the man farthest left collapsed.

The other two gazed down at their fallen comrade wide-eyed, then their gazes drifted over to the unconscious Consuelo. Both lay so quiet, it was impossible to tell if they were unconscious or dead.

The man who had escaped the falling ladder with Consuelo asked, “What kind of a gun is that?”

“It shoots poison darts,” Illya Kuryakin said. “Kills instantly. Now I’m going to ask once more. Anyone else in the castle?”

Both men hurriedly began to speak at once, stopped, glanced at each other. Then the one who had spoken before said, “Mr. Moreno is supposed to be, but he’s disappeared. Barth and Consuelo thought that the guy in the rear tower fed him to the alligators.”

Illya glanced at April Dancer.

“That figures. That blood you saw must have been Sancho’s.” He turned back to the two men. “No one else at all around? How about servants?”

“Moreno always sends them into town when he has something special going here,” the second man said. “There’s only a cook and a couple of cleaning maids, and he sent them into Vina Rosa earlier. Honest to God, mister, there’s nobody else here but us.”

Kuryakin nodded satisfaction. “May as well call Mark down from there,” he said to April.

Going over to the window, April yelled, “Mark! Mark Slate!”

Slate’s head appeared from the upper window of the other tower.

“Hi, love,” he yelled back.

“About time you appeared. We’ve been holed up in this rat-infested place for hours.”

“Well, you can come down now,” April called. “It’s all clear.”

There wasn’t room in Napoleon Solo’s and Illya Kuryakin’s rented car for nine people. They located the panel truck in which Mark Slate had been driven to the castle and loaded the four bound prisoners in back. Solo and Kuryakin said they would take the emaciated Juan in their car and April and Slate could follow in the panel truck.

“What are you going to do with the prisoners, though?” Solo asked. “Will it do any good to turn them over to the Lombodian police?”

April said, “With Moreno dead, I doubt that his influence will extend to protecting subordinates. They might even be quite glad to see Consuelo. What else can we do with them?”

“I guess it would be against U.N.C.L.E.‘s code just to feed the alligators,” Slate said. “We’ll turn them in and see what happens.”

It turned out that with Moreno’s death, his influence among powerful Lombodians was equally dead. The police welcomed Consuelo and her three companions with maximum security cells and assured April Dancer and Mark Slate they would be out of circulation for some time.